

# Courageous Conversations

## Strategies for Inclusive Graduate Admissions



### Preparing for the Admissions Process

Inclusive admissions processes don't begin when the applications are evaluated. There are many things you can do before the evaluation to identify potential applicants and prepare for an inclusive process.

- 1** Engage in ongoing dialogue within the department about the role of graduate admissions as it relates to diversity and inclusion.
- 2** Envision graduate student recruitment as an ongoing activity rather than a one-time effort. View recruitment as a scouting activity -- identify and build relationships with potential applicants over time.
- 3** Reach out to applicants from underrepresented groups individually before (and during) application season. For example, seek out talented scholars at conferences and invite them to campus.
- 4** Attend specialized (discipline-specific, diversity-related) conferences to identify potential applicants and begin to build relationships.

### The Graduate Admissions Committee

The graduate admissions committee plays an integral role in preparing for and conducting an inclusive admissions process. These are some helpful considerations for giving admissions committees the tools they need to be successful in their charge.

- 1** Assemble a diverse graduate admissions committee with a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. Studies have shown that the presence of women and people of color results in a more careful assessment of candidates' materials (Kang et al., 2012; Sommers, 2006).
- 2** Increase the "bias literacy" of admissions committee members by reviewing the literature on unconscious bias, exploring evidence-based strategies for minimizing its influence, and agreeing as a committee what strategies to employ (Carnes et al., 2015).
- 3** Encourage a culture of asking questions and constructively challenging each others' assumptions and biases throughout the admissions process. Support your claims with existing research showing that graduate student diversity advances institutional excellence.

## The Rubric

The way you outline criteria for evaluation can set the stage for recruiting and admitting a diverse applicant pool. Keep these things in mind when considering criteria and qualifications for admission.

- 1** Develop a rubric of qualifications that convey's the department's and University's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Avoid the use of stereotype-priming language and assumptions (Leibbrandt & List, 2012).
- 2** Request that all candidates provide a "diversity, equity and inclusion statement" as part of their application materials. This can include how their teaching, research or service activities contribute to diversity and inclusion efforts.
- 3** Broaden the rubric and qualifications list to attract the widest possible range of qualified candidates. Consider aspects of a holistic review process that go beyond GPA and standardized test scores. Studies show that female candidates are more likely to apply for roles when they meet 100% of the requirements, while male candidates will apply when they meet only 60% (Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Meaney, 2008).
- 4** Discuss the social and emotional qualifications for success that go beyond academic measures. These might include qualities such as persistence, grit and success while overcoming adversity.

## Building the Pool

The pool of applicants should be cultivated in advance of the admissions process, but there are some steps you can take to broaden the outreach to prospective applicants with a wide range of backgrounds.

- 1** Actively search for applicants using conferences and databases designed to attract diverse applicant pools. Contact the Graduate School or the Office for Campus Diversity for suggestions.
- 2** Host and attend recruitment fairs that reach diverse applicants such as specialized organizations, professional associations, or culturally themed conferences.
- 3** When reaching out to colleagues, specifically ask for recommendations of strong candidates from underrepresented groups.
- 4** Be mindful of expectancy bias based on institutional reputation. Instead, consider candidates who are currently under-placed and thriving at less well-ranked institutions.

# Evaluating Applicants

Many aspects of the review, evaluation, and selection process are subject to unconscious assumptions. Consider the following strategies for mitigating bias in the admissions process.

- 1** Develop and prioritize evaluation criteria prior to evaluating candidates and apply them consistently to all applicants. Studies indicate that when criteria are not clearly articulated before reviewing candidates, evaluators may shift or emphasize criteria that favors those from well-represented demographic groups (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001; Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005).
- 2** When possible, implement blinded review, evaluation, and grading processes (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). Consider redacting application information such as names, email addresses, or undergraduate institutions.
- 3** Be able to defend every decision for eliminating or advancing a candidate. Studies indicate that holding evaluators to high standards of accountability for fairness reduces the influence of bias and assumptions (Foschi, 1996). Using an evaluation rubric encourages objective decision making.
- 4** Use an inclusion strategy rather than an exclusion strategy when evaluating applications. An inclusion strategy identifies the applicants that are suitable for consideration, while an exclusion strategy decides which candidates should be eliminated. Studies show that exclusion strategies result in higher levels of stereotyping and larger sets of excluded applicants (Hugenberg, Bodenhausen, & McLain, 2006).
- 5** Spend sufficient time evaluating each applicant. Research indicates that evaluators who are busy, distracted by other tasks, and under time pressure give women lower ratings than men for the same evaluation of performance. Bias decreases when evaluators are able to give adequate time to each applicant (Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2002).
- 6** Evaluate each applicant's entire application. Don't depend too heavily on one element (i.e., letters of recommendation, prestige of undergraduate institution, etc). Studies have shown significant patterns of difference in letters of recommendation for male and female applicants (Madera, Hebl, & Martin, 2009; Trix & Psenka, 2003).

**?** Are women and minority applicants subject to different expectations or standards?

**?** Are assumptions about possible family responsibilities negatively influencing evaluation of an applicant's merit?

**?** Are applicants from less well-ranked institutions being under-valued?

**?** Are there negative assumptions about whether women or minority candidates will "fit in?"

## The Selection

During the selection process, consider institutional resources that can help to support the student during their graduate school years. Consider incorporating a plan for retention in your decision-making process.

- 1** Consider how to create an admissions process and atmosphere that welcomes candidates. Think about your current orientation process and its suitability for different types of students. Identify potential resources on campus (both academic and social) that can help ease accepted students' transition to graduate school.
- 2** Encourage or provide opportunities for selected applicants to visit campus before making their decision to accept admission. Provide guidance regarding campus groups that may be of interest to the candidate or others who might be able to share what it is like to live and work here. Connect the selected applicant with someone who can provide a campus tour.
- 3** When interacting with applicants (both before and after selection), pay attention to the climate of the admissions process, including nonverbal and verbal communication. Become familiar with common patterns of microaggressions that may convey bias (i.e., mispronouncing of names, "othering" comments, and stereotypical assumptions).
- 4** Integrate diversity-related resources into your communication with selected applicants. Connect selected applicants with resources provided by the Graduate School and the Office for Campus Diversity. Highlight key aspects of the department and the University that work to advance diversity and inclusion.

## Debriefing the Admissions Process

When the admissions process is over, it is a good time to reflect on what went well and what could be improved in the future. Use these question prompts to reflect and refine your process.

- 1** How might we revise the rubric or list of qualifications to attract a broader pool of applicants? How might we incorporate a more holistic applicant review process?
- 2** Did our recruitment strategy yield a diverse pool of applicants? What were the effective recruitment channels?
- 3** What impression did applicants have of the University throughout the application and selection process?
- 4** What strategies might we use to develop and cultivate relationships with prospective applicants in advance of admissions season?



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