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We've Been Admitted: Now What?

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“The purpose of the roundtable is to share the challenges faced in making change at a predominantly white academic institution.”

Fifty percent of all doctoral students complete their program (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997), while only 30 percent to 40 percent of African American and Latino American doctoral students persist to graduation (Oliver & Brown, 1986; Sowell, 1989). A lack of faculty-student relationships and a sense of belonging are involved in minority students' attrition rates (Suen, 1983; Tinto, 1987). These were also the experiences of the authors that propelled them to make changes on their college campus. Their experiences and perceptions in establishing a mentoring program for graduate students of color in order to improve the institutional environment will be discussed. The purpose of the roundtable is to share the challenges faced in making change at a predominantly White academic institution. Specifically, the four overarching tasks an individual needs to accomplish when attempting to make change at an institution will be discussed; the authors will draw on their personal experiences for illustration.

The first task involves students articulating and sharing the problem with faculty members and administrators. A lack of social integration or institutional support may cause students to withdraw. In our case, rather than internalize our feelings, we expressed our issues and concerns to an administrator. We felt we had an obligation to create awareness surrounding our issue because those affiliated with the university may not have known or understood the issues we faced. Although improving our doctoral experience was important, we knew that campus-wide changes would not likely occur without corroboration from other minority graduate students about their experiences. We also know that minority graduate student issues must be shared beyond one administrator if the issues were to be resolved.

Attempting to investigate and develop solutions with the support of faculty members and administrators is the second task. As graduate students, we did not feel we possessed the power to push for and make changes at the institution. Armed with this knowledge, we gathered together faculty members and administrators to form an advisory board whose concern would be minority graduate student issues. We intended for the board to serve as a guiding force in the development of a plan of action. To help focus the board's efforts, we researched solutions implemented by various institutions to the problems facing minority graduate students.

The third task is to test the acceptability of a solution and garner verbal and monetary support for it. The research led us to propose the development of a mentoring program. Once we had decided this is where we would focus our efforts, it was necessary

to test its viability among future participants, i.e., faculty members, administrators, and graduate students.

A brainstorming sessions was held in order to give future participants an opportunity to give their input into the operation of the program. We were aware that support from participants would be more likely if they felt ownership of the program. In addition, our ability to show support from future participants would likely convince administrators to lend their verbal and monetary support.

Implementing a possible solution and providing feedback from participants is the last task. Obtaining varied support from future participants, administrators, and an advisory board made for a good programmatic start. In addition, programmatic support was given as those involved came to understand that preparations were in place for their participation in the form of leadership, activities, goals, etc. Although a good start for any new program is necessary, the continued success of a program is based on whether participants' needs are being met. To measure participants' needs, continual and extensive feedback was obtained.

Our experiences suggest that the above issues are those that will be confronted by minority students when attempting to make changes at a predominantly White institution. We believe this information will be beneficial to minority graduate students who attempt to change their institutional environment. At the conclusion of our discussion, we will reflect on the lessons we learned while going through the change process.

PRESENTERS:

Christine Robinson is the director of Academic Affairs-The Graduate Program at Indiana Institute of Technology in Fort Wayne, Indiana. In this position, she works closely with faculty members, graduate and undergraduate students in the business program. Her research interests and specializations are college student experiences and institutional change.

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