

CREATING A CRITICAL MASS: INTER-UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMING FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR

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Abstract--This paper addresses the need for, and effect of, creating a "critical mass" community of color for graduate students of color in the sciences and engineering, where they find themselves so underrepresented. It describes and begins to assess inter-university programming for graduate students of color developed at Carnegie Mellon University in collaboration with colleagues from the University of Pittsburgh and Duquesne University. Of particular interest in this assessment are the following: 1) the role of the Graduate Programs Office in building community intramurally; 2) the process of decision-making that went into combining inter-university and interdisciplinary programming so as to broaden the field of reference for faculty and students in the technical disciplines; 3) the role of the Graduate Student of Color Advisory Board in setting the agenda for our programming; and 4) the programmatic outreach and inclusion of *majority* faculty and staff, as well as faculty and staff of color, to extend learning and sensitivity in the larger community. This is a pilot program and so far the evidence of success is anecdotal

Index Terms-----

Retention of graduate students of color, inter-university initiatives, pilot year programming, program development.

INTRODUCTION

The Graduate Programs Office (GPO) at Carnegie Mellon has provided centrally-administered (as opposed to department-initiated) academic support programming for graduate students of color since 1992 when it approached the University of Pittsburgh about creating joint programming across the two universities. This was done at the request of the Graduate Advisory Board, then in effect, comprised mostly of graduate students of color and women graduates. The initial result was a one-day retreat on "Careers in the Academy" for graduate students of color, held jointly with the University of Pittsburgh. This was quickly followed by a "Survival Skills" dinner series that has been on-going for the last nine years, also in collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh. The need for consistent gathering, support, and networking, as opposed to a one-day event, was a primary motivation for this programmatic evolution. In addition to the dinner series, the GPO financed several dinners a year for African American doctoral students, the total number of

whom, university-wide, have numbered, and continue to number, in the teens.

In 1999, the GPO expanded and took on a full-time director. Current programming was assessed and a new approach was implemented in the fall of 2000. Instead of a strict "survival skills" format (with resident faculty and administrators coming in to advise graduate students of color on navigating their way to degree completion), the dinner series was now linked to a speaker series, housed at CMU and funded by ALCOA Foundation. The ALCOA Foundation Speaker Series features prominent academics and professionals of color who, in addition to delivering their university-wide lecture, agree to have dinner with graduate students of color (usually between 40 and 80 in attendance) from CMU, University of Pittsburgh, and Duquesne University. This venue involves a very informal sharing (perhaps 10 minutes of thoughts/observations/advice--and then open discussion) about the speaker's journey to his or her current career and position. Speakers address how issues of identity have affected their journeys. One graduate student has described the dinners as "How-To Sessions" that keep identity at the forefront of thinking about "how."

The focus of this paper is how the combination of inter-university and interdisciplinary participation, and the inviting of nationally-known minority role models, has affected the process of creating "critical mass" and what the costs and benefits of this widening participation have been. This is a pilot program and so far the evidence of success is anecdotal

DISCUSSION

In the fall of 1999, graduate student breakdowns by race, ethnicity, and citizenship at Carnegie Mellon and at the University of Pittsburgh looked like this:

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Graduate Retention Discussion

GRADUATE STUDENT BREAKDOWNS BY RACE, ETHNICITY, AND CITIZENSHIP AT CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY AND THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH, FALL 1999

	Black	American Indian/	Asian-American/	Hispanic	White	Non-resident	Total
University	(non-Hispanic)	Alaskan Native	Pacific Islander			Alien	
Carnegie Mellon	2.3%	[n=2]	4.7%	1.4%	30.0%	41.0%	3174*
Univ. of Pittsburgh	5.9%	[n=11]	5.1%	1.6%	71.9%	15.5%	9075

*PERCENTAGES FOR CMU DO NOT ADD UP TO 100% BECAUSE IDENTIFICATION IS OPTIONAL AND MANY GRADUATE STUDENTS DO NOT SELF-IDENTIFY. [1]

Monthly "Student of Color" dinners were attended, typically, by two or three Carnegie Mellon African American graduate students from engineering departments and the Heinz School of Public Policy and Management. Between 25 and 40 African American graduate students from the University of Pittsburgh were attending, many from arts and sciences departments, some from the medical school. The goal of the dinners, from the GPO's point of view, was to allow the very small numbers of CMU graduate students of color to benefit from inclusion in the larger community of color at the University of Pittsburgh. The dinners served African American graduate students almost exclusively. It was a tight-knit, supportive venue that stressed academic and professional skills needed for successful degree completion.

Over the course of the 1999-2000 academic year, several issues of programmatic definition began to surface. The GPO initiated a Graduate Student of Color Advisory Board and asked its members to consider the goals of the dinner series, the language defining it, and the format and content. Out of these board meetings, more questions than answers emerged.

1. Should invitations be sent to all underrepresented groups on campus? Or did this entail "lumping" very diverse groups of students together, making myriad inappropriate assumptions about their concerns and experiences? There was no consensus on this question.
2. Why was the dinner series entitled "Student of Color Dinners"? What sort of message did this send to Latino students (for one example) some of whom see themselves as "white" but still often feel "other" within the university setting? On the other hand, many understand "the color line" as the primary dividing line when it comes to opportunity and recognition in America and don't want this reality "swept under the rug." Again, there was little consensus on this question.
3. Was it useful to have the dinner series serve multiple departments and disciplines or were academic and professional norms too divergent at the graduate level to bear treatment in such a broad forum? On this topic, the

sheer lack of numbers at the department level clearly necessitated broader participation if a community of color was to emerge at all. There was agreement on this issue.

4. A sometimes tacit goal of supporting traditionally underrepresented graduate students through to degree completion is the transformation/evolution of academic culture. With this goal in mind, is it better strategically to develop "targeted" programming that serves students of color or graduate women, for instance, or to develop global diversity programming that involves majority members of academia in the process of transformation? Does it do harm to "balkanize" students who feel "other" within the academy? Or, is it a real necessity to survival just to be able to gather from time to time with a critical mass of supportive colleagues who "look like oneself"--to relax, be oneself, and be renewed? This issue clearly broke down along theoretical versus practical criteria. It is important to insist that majority members take equal responsibility for a more inclusive academy, especially in theory. However, the accomplishment of this goal is, in practice, uneven at best. Practically speaking, the board felt a balance of these two approaches was needed and the dinner series was a piece that should not be abandoned, in the interest of eventual institutional transformation.

The outcome of advisory board discussions were a set of programmatic "choices" that were tested over the course of the year.

- Invitations and outreach were extended to all underrepresented graduate student groups on Carnegie Mellon's campus, resulting in expanding participation by international Asian and Latino graduate students and Asian American graduate students.
- The title of the dinner series was retained, but a short description that clarified the goals of the dinners was usually included in notices announcing dates and times of meetings.
- For every dinner, 100 invitations were sent to majority as well as minority faculty, evenly distributed across the disciplines/graduate programs.

By the end of 1999-2000, CMU attendance was slightly up--between 5-10 students a dinner. Feedback from CMU's engineering and science graduate students indicated their relief at finding themselves among "more laid-back" or "more well-rounded" graduate students from the arts and sciences at the University of Pittsburgh. A typical comment was: "They're so much saner than we are! It was nice to just laugh."

Graduate Retention Discussion

All of the signs from the first year indicated that connection across universities and across disciplines was beneficial to underrepresented graduate students in the technical fields. In addition, discussions increasingly included consideration of citizenship as integral to the experience of graduate study--another dimension along which to gauge university norms. Ironically, in spite of the desire for finding themselves amongst people "who looked like themselves" along all these dimensions, CMU graduate students were articulating a benefit coming from understanding differences among themselves.

Over the summer, the GPO initiated discussions with its collaborators at University of Pittsburgh about expanding the horizons of the dinner series. The decision was made to extend an invitation to graduate students of color at Duquesne University to once again enhance community. University of Pittsburgh also agreed to have academics and professionals of color from the national higher education arena, who were speaking through the ALCOA Foundation Series, come and speak at the dinners. Though not explicit, the differing goals of administrators at the two institutions were apparent. For University of Pittsburgh, the dinners constituted a successful program that drew a significant number of their graduate students, providing them, not only with a sense of community, but also with important academic skills. For CMU, the "return" was less gratifying: numbers were fewer and the process seemed less likely to have an impact on CMU graduate students' experience of their home institution, to complement and reinforce their links to the larger Pittsburgh community. At the same time, a larger institutional initiative on diversity was being led by the president at CMU. One of the GPO's goals was to enable the joint dinners to be a part of that synergy--to connect this program with other diversity-related programs on CMU's campus, so that they could build on each other. The increased outreach on campus, to both majority and different underrepresented groups, as well as the link to a well-attended lecture series, promised greater potential intramurally, as well as a greater presence across the three universities.

The newly-conceived dinner series programming for 2000-2001 has included visits from;

- . a poet/ faculty member from the University of Pittsburgh;
- . an assistant professor from Harvard Medical School who constitutes, in and of himself, a phenomenal study in interdisciplinarity as he is an M.D., a neuroscientist and an anaesthesiologist;
- . an assistant Professor in the Department of Performance Studies, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University;
- . a premiere jazz pianist and director of Jazz Studies at the University of New Orleans;

- . a graduate school survival skills workshop, run by a professor of neurology at the University of Pittsburgh; and
- . a professor of Spanish, who is also an adjunct professor of Women's Studies and Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona.

. Still to come are:

- . a superior court judge; the president of the Urban League of Pittsburgh; and a city councilman, all three of whom will visit with graduate students after speaking at CMU on a panel on "Race in Pittsburgh,"
- . the president of a consulting company that specializes in educational, governmental, and industrial organizations--and one-time executive director of the GEM Program (Graduate Degrees for Minorities in Engineering and Science); and
- . an assistant professor of Systems Engineering from the University of Virginia.

The title of the dinner series is "Expanding OurHorizons." The tenor of the dinner meetings has been

1. more personal,
2. specific to individuals' circumstances, yet broader in scope because of the diverse experiences of the visitors,
3. abstract and somewhat theoretical to the extent that individuals' insights involve self-examination and assessment of the academic and professional cultures they relate to; and
4. less directly skills-oriented.

The dinner group is now in the process of evolving in interesting and challenging ways as it negotiates becoming a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic group, after a history of being predominantly African American. The latest evaluation responses indicate unanimous support (from graduate students and faculty at all three institutions) for becoming a more diverse group--a consensus we had not expected. We were, instead, worried about a sense of loss of solidarity among African American graduate students. In contrast, however, typical comments include:

- . "I see this as a definite plus, not a minus. Students who belong to underrepresented minorities should understand what they have in common with others and NOT feel that only people with EXACTLY their backgrounds share their concerns." (faculty member, German Literature and Language, U.Pitt)
- . "I do feel that the dinner builds a community for me, and I much prefer that that community be made up of a greater mix of people. I have noticed the increase in participation by other races and cultures this year, and have gladly welcomed this change. I think a greater

participation would allow more than just the dominant attendees' (black) perspectives on issues that are not wholly unique to them." (doctoral student, Chemical Engineering, CMU)

"I like the focus on role models because it gives an additional feeling that we are not alone and that it is possible to make it. I believe that this is a survival skill and a very important one. Also, I am glad that the dinners are inclusive of other peoples of color. I enjoy listening to their experiences and points of view. And I'm glad that the people that we have been bringing in come from all different discipline areas. It makes me feel as if there is something for everyone and I also see many of the cross-discipline similarities in experiences." (masters student, psychology, U. Pitt).

"I cannot speak for the costs, but I think it is wonderful that we can have multiple constituencies, as I am speaking as an international Asian student. Although I do not feel the strongest sense of belonging (yet), still participating in the dinner was very significant for me because the sense of alienation--which I tend to think is shared by many (inter-national) students, especially those who are visibly marked as different--was so strongly felt by me." (doctoral student, neuropsychology, Duquesne University).

One set of remarks was slightly more ambivalent. Though supportive of the interdisciplinary and multiple-constituency format, this student went on to speak to the move away from a more concrete "skills" orientation: "The presence of role models is always helpful to give inspiration to those of us who follow in their footsteps. However, if there is not a specific topic/goal to be addressed, then nothing may result that students can take away and apply to their personal/professional lives to improve them. I need to learn how to effectively deal with issues/situations both relevant to 'people of color' and students as a whole." (doctoral student, Chemical Engineering, CMU) While this feedback is easily incorporated into our orientation of the speakers to the dinner's agenda, it is worth noting. Equally edifying is the following qualification by one African American graduate student from the sciences at University of Pittsburgh who supported broadening the group's membership, but with the following caveat. "...at the same time I think there is a uniqueness to what African Americans experience in this country in terms of discrimination that should not be overlooked or minimized. There is a certain sense of being considered to be the bottom of the bottom that other groups don't experience in this country. "

CONCLUSIONS

This Student of Color Dinner Series, administered and supported jointly by three universities, is still in the process of developing and being assessed. At present, attendance by Duquesne affiliates is quite small--2-3 people a dinner. It takes time to build recognition and for people to become advocates for a community. CMU attendance is up: between 15-25 students a dinner, which given the overall numbers is a sizeable turnout! The questions raised by CMU's Graduate Student of Color Advisory Board are not all resolved. But there are a few things that are beginning to be apparent, at least for this group of students.

1. Involving graduate students of color in the process of program development is a win-win strategy that assures "buy-in" by those students, to be sure. But, just as importantly, this involvement engages graduate students in an on-going analysis of their relationship to the academic culture in which they find themselves--one that affords them a broad perspective on the academy, its limitations and potential--all within a supportive and nurturing environment.
2. Developing academic support programming across the disciplines is, at least for now, one of the few ways to build a "critical mass" community of color for graduate students in science and engineering fields within the academy. This decision also appears to have unanticipated benefits in contextualizing the scientific and technical fields, both generalizing their "norms" in ironically reassuring ways for students of color *and* exposing those same students to the ways in which climate in other departments might serve as examples for their own.
3. In the same way, connecting graduate students of color with their peers at neighbor universities expands their familiarity with a broader range of academic experience, as well as a broader network of local mentors. Expanding that network to include nationally-known academics and professionals of color from the higher education arena multiplies this effect.
4. Majority faculty involvement certainly greater than it was before we began inviting so many from across the disciplines. One unanticipated version of this is the *de facto* involvement of CMU faculty who have been instrumental in inviting ALCOA Foundation speakers to campus. They have accompanied their colleagues to the dinners and thereby been exposed to this programming.
5. The switch from a "survival skills" format to personal narratives of professional journeys has not meant the abandonment of advising or mentoring at the dinners, but rather the levels at which these discussions occur. A

common thread, for instance, across the dinners has been the conscious modeling of what speakers have termed the "evasion" or "outfoxing" of racist obstacles. That is to say, the recommendation is to not engage in angry protestation to one's own detriment, but to focus instead on how to "beat the system," "get around those individuals who do not support you," and come out on top. Individual instances of how this was done in the speakers' lives provide important examples to follow.

6. Finally, and most importantly, I believe this year's outcomes will attest to the value of innovating, experimenting, and assessing, even when there is no clear consensus on which direction to go in. It appears so far that both graduate students and faculty are engaged in the process of learning together.

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