

Episode 40 – Representational Aspiration in Graduate Education

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

This is the final episode of Season 2, and as I reflect on my original plans for this season, I'm struck by how dramatically the graduate education landscape has changed. My intentions of producing episodes on how to prepare for, apply to, and get into graduate school have certainly been met. We started with [Episode 16](#) on participation in undergraduate research as your secret weapon for getting into grad school and ended with [Episode 37](#) on what to do after receiving your offer of admission. Along the way we talked about [personal statements](#), [housing](#), and [how to apply for a student visa if you are an international student](#) in Episode 29. About that time, things started to change – dramatically so. Not only has the United States become less hospitable for international students, but universities have been put on notice that anything related to promoting and supporting students from under-represented and marginalized groups will not be tolerated by this administration. So, despite the progress we made this season, I close with some final thoughts on where we are with diversity, equity, and inclusion in graduate education, and how we might move forward from what seems to be an ever-retreating position on fairness, common sense, and opportunity.

I spent my entire faculty career at a private institution in a major city in the Gulf South. As of the Fall 2024 student census, this institution had an overall student demographic profile of 11% Black. This was in a city that was 55% Black, in a state that was 33% Black, in a country that was 14% Black. Conversely, this Predominantly White Institution – a so-called PWI – was 63% white in a city that was 30% white in a state that was 57% white in a country that was 58% white. What's wrong with this picture? This institution is not just “predominantly” white – it's blatantly white. A BWI if you will.

These are not unusual demographics for an elite, private institution, though. They're not even unusual for colleges in general. The flagship campus of the land-grant university in the very same state as this elite private institution had a student enrollment that was only [19% Black or African-American in Spring of 2025](#). Again, this is in a state that is 33% Black. What SHOULD the percentage of African-American students be? Well, “state” is right in the name of this institution, so one might expect that its demographics reflect that of the state it's in. By that definition, it fails. You could argue that as a Carnegie Research I institution, it is a national institution that attracts students from around the country and serves more than just the state that it's in. In that sense, it succeeds on this narrow criterion of Black representation since 19% is greater than 14%. However, it would fail on the percentage of Asian (4.5%) and American Indian/Alaska Native American students (0.4%) which represent 6.4% and 1.3% of the U.S. population, respectively. So, you can't have it both ways.

But you should have it at least one way. That is, you should know who you are, or better yet, know who you aspire to be. If your institution is not interested in having a student demographic profile that reflects a population that it serves, then it should state that. I know that mission statements don't generally say what an institution doesn't do – nor should they – but by stating what populations you **DO** intend to serve you are implying which populations you do not. If you say that you are serving the citizens of the great state or commonwealth in which you reside, then you are stating that you are committed to serving **ALL** the citizens. It then follows that your student profile should reflect that of the state or commonwealth. I call this “representational aspiration.” A Representational Aspirant institution is one that states which populations it is primarily serving – local, state, or national – and that its student, faculty, and staff demographic profiles will reflect that of the population it is serving. It's pretty simple in theory, but difficult in practice. You have to be willing – and able – to set admissions goals that reflect your representational aspirations.

The problem is that – for the foreseeable future – the Supreme Court has outlawed affirmative action in university admissions practices, and the current administration has extrapolated that narrow finding to mean that all things related to diversity are illegal. They're wrong, of course, but until there are legal challenges to the contrary, diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in all areas of campus life have been shelved. There has been push-back, for sure, but prominent institutions – our so-called “models” of the modern research university – have very visibly gutted DEI programs. The University of Michigan [closed its Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and the Office of Health Equity and Inclusion](#). Columbia University [removed DEI statements](#) amid its ongoing battle with the federal government. And the situation with Harvard University is changing so rapidly that by the time this episode airs anything I say about it will be outdated. These are not isolated examples. The elimination of any efforts to make colleges and universities equitable institutions where multiple voices can be heard is widespread and deep, from elite, private institutions to land-grant universities to regional colleges.

I'm not suggesting that the faculty, staff and leadership of these institutions don't care about DEI anymore. I truly believe that they are as committed to supporting underrepresented and marginalized groups as before, but that they have made a pragmatic decision to avoid drawing attention to their activities in the hope that their research portfolios won't be gutted and their accreditation won't be stripped. I think their research portfolios will be gutted regardless of their DEI efforts as the current administration is more interested in undermining free thought than they are supporting innovation and the workforce, and accreditation is about to be rendered meaningless by new standards and practices, but I understand that universities are responding to the immediate threat. They may be looking simply for ways to broaden their admissions practices that do not run afoul of current anti-DEI sentiment. Representational aspiration is one way to do that.

In addition to the Carnegie Classification system of designating universities by research and teaching mission that I discussed at length in Episodes [14](#) and [32](#), universities have geographical

missions, even if they are not explicitly stated. Very High Research Activity institutions have national and international reaches. They tout this national reach in their advertising and promotional materials. Their representational aspiration goals could be therefore national in nature. There are institutions with clearly regional reach. These are often state-run institutions with what we call “directional” designations such as north, south, east, and west in their names, although there are certainly others. These regional institutions could strive for a student population that reflects the region in which they say they have impact. Similarly, there are state and locally focused institutions. We even call them “community colleges” in some instances. Their student population should reflect the communities that they serve.

In this way, not all institutions of higher education have the same demographic profile. If they did, HBCUs would be predominantly white, which doesn’t make a lot of sense. Different universities can have different missions and serve different communities. Some are research intensive, some are not. Some have a religious mission, others are nonsectarian. But those ideals are usually reflected in a mission statement. The populations the institutions are serving are generally not stated in such explicit terms. They should be. And those statements of mission and community should be made at various levels within the institution.

To this point I have lumped undergraduate and graduate and professional students into one demographic table. That was to make the case for representational aspiration in the broadest of terms. But this is ostensibly a podcast on graduate education, so what do demographics and effectiveness of the undergraduate student population have to do with the demographics and effectiveness of graduate programs? Well, the answer should be obvious. Without representation at the undergraduate level, graduate programs stand little chance of achieving representation. Some “smoothing” out could be done through targeted recruiting as I’ll discuss in a moment, but the Supreme Court has outlawed race and ethnicity considerations in graduate student admissions. We can introduce proxies for race and ethnicity, but that’s not the point of this podcast, either. The point is that without demographic goals at the undergraduate level, representational aspiration at the graduate level becomes very difficult.

On the other hand, can undergraduate and graduate programs at the same institution have different representational aspirations? Sure. I might even argue that they **should** be different. Even if your undergraduate mission is based upon local, state, or regional needs and you base your student demographic aspirations on those metrics, your graduate programs are by and large nationally competitive programs. Even professional programs that profess to meet regional workforce needs – like master’s of nursing programs – involve explicitly national components – like travel nursing. Graduate programs should aspire to have student representation that reflects our nation’s demographics, because that’s where their graduates are going to compete for jobs, live their lives, and spend their money.

Most graduate programs are too small to meet their representational aspirations in a single year or cohort. A rolling average appropriate to the degree level is a perfectly reasonable approach. If

your PhD program can't meet its representational aspirations with a moving six-year statistic, then it needs to change its approach. This is the same standard used for graduation rates. The same can be said for three-year profiles of master's programs.

Achieving representational aspiration goals in graduate education will be difficult, especially since the anti-DEI movement has limited a program's ability to implement equitable admissions standards. But recruitment efforts can be more targeted to help a program achieve its representational aspiration goals. Just like holistic admissions practices became more widely accepted, representational aspiration can be a component of recruiting practices. But graduate programs will need to move beyond holistic admissions review and move away from hegemonic practices like favoring certain undergraduate institutions over others in their applicants. Again, this isn't a podcast about the implicit biases of merit, but faculty and admissions officers are supposedly smart people. They can figure that out for themselves. They should also be able to target their recruiting practices to meet their representational aspirations.

How do we enforce this designation and make sure that institutions and programs achieve their representational aspirations? We don't. There should be no need to enforce an ideal that is good for the economy, good for the citizenry, good for the faculty and staff they employ, good for the students, and good for the country. Students will vote with their feet. If a graduate program doesn't provide the educational experience they say they do – including representing the populations they serve – then students seeking a robust educational experience will go elsewhere. We can, however, reward those who achieve their representational aspirations. Maybe this is an additional Carnegie Classification designation in much the same way that there are [Community Engagement designations](#). Maybe state or local governments come up with their own rewards to honor the achievement. Maybe professional societies or graduate education organizations can provide this designation. But ultimately peer pressure is what moves graduate programs. Just like other institutions followed the lead of the University of Michigan and Columbia University in their DEI retreats – and ironically followed them in their original DEI efforts – they will follow them in setting representational aspiration goals.

Look, there is going to be consolidation in the higher education industry in the coming years. I've outlined the forces working against graduate enrollment in general in [Episode 38](#), including elimination of student loan programs, a real and perceived crackdown on international students, and the looming demographic cliff on top of the anti-DEI movement. Fewer students will be going to college in the next decade. Full stop. Why not take this opportunity to not just right size programs but to right size representation? If an HBCU merges with a PWI college rather than both shuttering their doors, a more representative institution could result.

Let's bring this topic full circle with the recognition that the ends should not justify the means. We are witnessing the revocation of our constitutional right to due process for the unachievable goal of ending illegal immigration. We are unwillingly forfeiting our First Amendment rights to free speech and free assembly for the laudable but unattainable goal of ending antisemitism. We

are deinvesting in every form of innovation – scientific and sociological alike - towards an anti-free-market goal of domestic manufacturing independence. None of these means justify the goals. In the same way, diversity, equity, and inclusion are laudable ends, but we must now reconsider how we will achieve those ideals. If we as a society – or at least as a government - have decided that what we have collectively called “DEI” activities are no longer our preferred method for achieving the individual ends for which the acronym stands, then we need to find independent means of achieving them. Representational aspiration is one such tool. It will help us achieve diversity, but not equity nor inclusivity. But without diversity, the rest is moot.

Thank you for staying with me this season. As always, transcripts of each podcast complete with links are available on my website at grad-post.com. The number of you accessing the website and these podcasts continues to rise, and I still have plenty to say, so even though I will be taking a break this summer I have every intention of returning in August for Season 3. My current plan is to focus on those of you in your first year of graduate school, but there will be important updates on previous topics, I’m sure. To those of you in marginalized groups who may feel like everyone is turning against you, be strong. There are still people out there who believe in you and will give you opportunities to succeed. It may have gotten harder for you to get an advanced degree in the past six months, but if a master’s or doctorate degree is still in your plans, it will still count. Maybe now more than ever. Have a great summer.

Links

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045224>

https://lsu.edu/data/_test/_archive/race.php

<https://president.umich.edu/news-communications/messages-to-the-community/evolving-our-approach-to-dei-and-moving-forward-together/>

<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2025/02/19/columbia-alters-dei-statements-on-university-web-pages-amid-trump-executive-orders/>

<https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/elective-classifications/community-engagement/>