Not on My Watch: How to have a diverse academic program and high quality students in your program at the same time?

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How was I going to do this?? How was I going to still ensure that students from a diverse background would still have access to my program and an opportunity to gain a graduate education?

Here is the dilemma: The faculty in my department wants to use the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) as a criterion for admissions into our Master’s program. This is a new shift since my university has made the decision to move to a research one institution. Now on the outside, this sounds like a wonderful idea. The university where I am employed is a Hispanic serving institution with over 28,000 students. We have developed many new doctoral programs including a new Ph.D. program in my department. So, of course, the next step is to move up in the Carnegie rankings to a research intensive institution. Furthermore, for the last several years, we have recruited young, energetic faculty and senior faculty who are still hungry for growth. With this new faculty dynamic comes the increase desire for research and a move towards securing more grant funding and a shift from the primary focus centering on teaching.

UGH, the conversation starts between me and my faculty, “

Well you know we are going to have to start restricting our admissions. We just cannot continue to let anyone in. Anyone in, what does that really mean? You mean diverse students? Of course, that is not what we mean. Well, help me understand what you mean please.

I already knew the answer as I felt my stomach drop, but was hoping I could delay the inevitable for as long as possible. I had passionately believed that I would do everything in my power to make sure I would provide opportunities for all students to secure higher education. I was especially impassioned for students from diverse backgrounds who previously been denied graduate education or who for whatever reason just did not perceive higher education to be a option for them. When I reflected back on one of my reasons for choosing my current institution, it was because of the mission and vision statements which focused on access and opportunity. These core components, access and opportunity, were integral to the establishment of this institution of higher learning with a predominately Hispanic student population. Now, here we are at an institutional crossroads in our professional development. Research one and international status or access and opportunity? The populace chose to restrict enrollment, increase admission standards, and seek additional accreditation.

Was it possible for us to have it all? Could we possibly attain the Carnegie status and still provide access for all students? I thought this an impossible task. How could we possibly accomplish this and still be true to the core of what I firmly believed? If we go to standardized testing as a criterion for admissions, we would lose a very important segment of the student population. My mission and goals professionally centers around attracting into graduate education the disenfranchised minority student. Now don’t get me wrong regarding my views of standardized testing, I have always believed in the importance of a quality education. I have also believed that some students just need to have the opportunity to prove they are capable of being successful in a graduate education without being
screened out by a test not designed for the purposes of determining if someone is capable of graduate education in the first place. Research has shown on numerous occasions that minority students do not perform as well as majority students on these types of test. I have seen the test utilized more as a screen-out versus a screen-in process.

To give you a little more context to the story, I am an African-American female department chair of 27 tenured/tenure-track faculty, over 20 adjuncts, two masters programs, and a Ph.D. program and another doctoral program in the works. I did not just happen to fall into this departmental position. I have worked very strategically in my professional development to attain the job as an administrator of an academic unit. I could have very easily gone the route of being a Student Affair’s professional which is my first love, but saw the dearth of females and specifically women of color serving as an academic administrator. Therefore, I purposely chose this professional route of academic affairs. I understood the importance of having the credentials and experiences which would allow me to be placed in a position to be a change agent. I have worked tirelessly to make this happen and to ensure I can make a difference by keeping my mission of empowerment and opportunity for the disenfranchised in the forefront of all I do.

As I contemplated what was happening in my department, I pulled out our departmental mission, vision, and goal statements. Right there at the very beginning of these statements are the foundational principles of diversity, creativity, and relational development. We have them interspersed and integrated in all that we do. These are the concepts which are supposed to be at the core of who we are as a faculty and as a department. So, why was I finding myself now at odds with a faculty I had basically hand-picked to move this vision forward?

I was deeply and gravely perplexed.

I did not want my faculty to perceive me as being irrational on this issue, but as I looked at their faces, I felt this was just what was happening. As we went through the process of determining our strategic initiatives for our new doctoral program and the move towards accreditation, the obvious answer was we would have to restrict admissions.

Over the last twenty years or so that I have been in higher education whenever the discussion commenced on getting a “higher quality” student, it inevitably came down to grade point average and scores on admissions test. I have been revolted by this assumption that these two criteria alone were used as the gatekeepers to higher education. I know from personal experiences that these two criterions were not enough to effectively select the best or brightest student. Yes, they are easy to use and much more objective because on the outside you think you are dealing with only numbers, but that is an illusion. Those are not the best or only criterions for student success. It must involve so much more. Character, environment, motivation, support systems, and many more factors impact the student success.

Okay, so back to my dilemma. Here I am in a department meeting looking at my faculty and trying to explain to them why we must not use the GRE. They are looking at me basically as if I have lost my mind, but trying to do it in a conciliatory manner. I plead with them not to do this. I look at the faculty and think,

half of you are minority faculty and have you seemingly forgotten where you came from and the impact
this will have on students who were very similar to you. I cannot believe what is happening. I have dug
my feet in the sand and basically said,

NO WAY!! No way am I going to allow this to happen. I don’t care if you think I am being unreasonable.
Then, someone calls for a vote, assuming of course that we are functioning in a democracy. I sit there
and try to compose myself and wait for the vote. Low and behold, the faculty votes in a majority to
include the GRE. They look at me to see how I am going to react. As I am sitting there, I am thinking,

how did this happen? Not on my watch! I had promised to safeguard the disenfranchised. I had
promised to provide them with opportunities for a higher education as long as I was in charge and right
now before my very eyes this tragedy was occurring. What could I do? How could I make them see? I
tried to compose myself, but I was losing this battle quickly.

I believe one of the faculty members saw the tears of defeat in my eyes and felt sorry for me.

Can we come to a compromise? Okay, I am listening. What kind of compromise? Well, you know we
have to have some type of criterion to use for admissions. We can no longer go on admitting all who
come along. So, let’s see what we can do to be creative. Okay, I really am open to suggestions.

Well, to make a long story much shorter, here is our compromise. We are still going to use the GRE
with a writing test and grade point average as components of a portfolio the student must present in
their admissions package. Additionally, the students must include in this portfolio an essay addressing
the program’s mission and vision statements. Also, the letters of recommendations the student must
submit will include questions about the applicants interpersonal skills and working with a diverse
population. All of these components are assigned points based on a scale which will allow some
objectivity and subjectivity in our application process.

I must say I still cried about the inclusion of the GRE, but on hindsight, I feel this was the best
compromise for all to feel as if their voices were heard and taken seriously. I still at times feel as if I
failed, but also as an administrator realized there was no way we could have continued with basically
open admissions and become accredited nationally.

To be honest on another note, I conducted a survey of our current students and past students. In this
survey I inquired about whether they would have applied to our program if we had the GRE in the first
place. Surprisingly an overwhelming majority said yes.

Also, since we have implemented this new admissions process, we have not seen a significant
decrease in admissions nor have we seen a decrease in our diversity.

So, was I wrong? I don’t know yet. The verdict is still out. I am hoping I was and that we still get the
quality and diversity of students that we must have to be successful.

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