

Divided we learn

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(Photo from Tullanian magazine)

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The time to diversify higher education is now, but we must do so by taking a step back and deconstructing the notion that we can fix the issue with a few tweaks to admissions or recruiting processes. We must approach longstanding, sometimes uncomfortable, institutional issues with a multipronged and deliberate plan of action. This includes examining the full educational journey of a student and beginning to

implement thoughtful solutions from kindergarten through graduate school if we want to challenge — and change — the status quo.

When students at every level of education have strong psychological support groups, they are much more likely to succeed. For example, when low-performing students in a Louisiana district were provided a “learning support” program consisting of psychological and educational support to counter barriers to success, their graduation rate rose by over 8 percent. The district also saw a significant rise in overall academic success.

Equipping students with tools they need to develop their social skills and emotional intelligence is another critical step. Some students have never been exposed to concepts like self-management and the regulation of emotion, not to mention the intangibles that go into building healthy relationships and making responsible decisions in their own self-interest.

Allocating funding for school psychologists, academic counselors and other one-on-one support systems are commonsense steps for institutions to support vulnerable students during vital years of cognitive development that can ultimately impact the personal, academic and professional aspects of a student’s life.

Some graduate programs have identified dropping the GRE as a solution to increase diversity. In examining our admissions processes, faculty and admissions officers must challenge the belief that building diversity hinges solely on changing one criterion.

Disregarding the one piece of an admissions packet that levels the playing field across race, gender and socioeconomic status is a step back to when social class was a determining factor in the college admissions process. Admissions processes that use standardized assessments, coupled with more subjective measures like essays, internships and interviews, are inherently fairer and more respectful to applicants.

Beyond holistic admissions processes, faculty members need to think about targeted student recruitment as an immediate, logical step toward greater diversity. By attending annual disciplinary-society events, a graduate program can begin to build visibility among interested students, helping to grow a more diversified pipeline over time. Faculty must be open to students who come from backgrounds different from our own.

Minimizing implicit biases, developing strong institutional support, diversifying the educator workforce and equipping teachers with the tools to provide social and emotional learning are all steps that we must begin taking to transform the idea of diversity into reality in America's graduate schools.