

Diversity: More than numbers

How some psychology departments shine in incorporating diversity into their coursework and social life.

By Tori DeAngelis



When Danielle Beatty was applying to grad schools, she knew she wanted two things: a program where people understood that social injustice happens on a personal as well as theoretical level, and a place where she would receive the same kind of strong mentoring she had in college.

Beatty found a winning combination at the social-personality psychology program of The Graduate Center at the City University of New York (CUNY), where she is now in her fifth year and studying the impact of racism and resilience on heart health.

"While it didn't have the same resources other schools did," she says, "the faculty paid more attention to my quality as a person, and less attention to my numerical value"—that is, to her test scores and her quota-filling potential as an African-American woman.

As she reaches the end of her schooling, Beatty hasn't been disappointed: "The same mentality I saw coming in, is what I've experienced throughout," she says. "It's about the faculty not wanting to make us look like cookie cutters of them, but instead helping us figure out what we want to do and how to do it."

The CUNY Graduate Center program is one of many around the country that are creating environments that support students of a wide range of diversities, including ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, disability and language. It is also an exemplary one: It won the 2006 Suinn Minority Achievement Award, an honor bestowed since 1999 on programs that have fostered such environments, often without external support, says the award's creator, former APA President [Richard M. Suinn, PhD](#).

"In the past, we often focused on what was not being done for diversity, while failing to recognize what was being done, often quietly, by some institutions," he says. "I wanted to call attention to, recognize and reward dedicated programs that were already proving their commitment through real actions and their own initiative."

Programs that live up to this image share a number of attributes, Suinn and others say. These include a strong commitment to diversity by faculty and other program leaders; a mission to study and serve diverse populations in more sensitive and culturally appropriate ways; strong mentoring to ensure that students receive the support needed to succeed in grad school; and an atmosphere of sharing, openness, cooperation and trust.

It Starts with Values

At root, diversity-friendly programs take a positive view of student potential—that students from minority backgrounds who want to become psychologists deserve a strong chance to do so, says Tracey A. Revenson, PhD, a psychology professor in the CUNY Graduate Center program.

"Many of our students come from colleges where they haven't had the advantages of a big lab or a famous mentor,"

Revenson explains. "So when we're thinking about whether or not to admit a student, we don't just say, 'Let's use a GRE cutoff,' or, 'Wait a minute, they had bad grades 10 years ago.' We really try to look at their raw talent." For this philosophy to translate into reality, faculty must come from a conscious place themselves, Revenson believes. "You need a school and faculty that hold core values, that really believe in the issues of social justice and diversity," she says.

An example of this type of faculty is at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's counseling psychology program, which received the 2006 Department of the Year award from the [American Psychological Association of Graduate Students](#) as well as the [Suinn award](#) in 2005. Besides including a range of diversity-related coursework and activities in their program, the faculty hold an annual retreat where they work together to understand their own race, gender and power issues, says Alberta M. Gloria, PhD, professor of counseling psychology and former director of training there. The meeting is the mirror image of a similar event they help students run, where students tackle challenging feelings and experiences they have had with discrimination or bias.

"We engage in exactly the same critical and difficult dialogues we ask our own students to engage in," Gloria notes. An article in the February-March 2006 *American Psychologist* (PDF, 209KB) (Vol. 61, No. 2, pages 143-156) underscores the importance of strong faculty and institutional commitment to nurturing a diverse student body. In surveying faculty and students at 11 exemplary programs, including several Suinn award winners, authors Margaret Rogers, PhD, of the University of Rhode Island, and Ludwin Molina, PhD, of the University of California, Los Angeles, found that such support is the chief driving force behind successful ethnic-minority recruitment and retention.

Playing Out the Philosophy

Indeed, when the faculty displays a firm commitment to diversity, other aspects of the program fall into place, students and faculty say. For example, successful programs conceptualize recruitment as an activity that must start early because many disadvantaged students wouldn't learn about psychology otherwise. They also see the importance of using recruiters from a similar background to those they're reaching out to, as does the Alaska Natives into Psychology, or ANPsych program, a federally funded University of Alaska (UA) initiative headquartered at the UA-Anchorage and UA-Fairbanks campuses. The program sends Alaska Native and American Indian students and psychologists to talk with Alaska Native high school youth about careers in psychology. Learn more in "[A mental health pipeline in Alaska](#)."

Likewise, admissions criteria at successful programs reflect the belief that minority students are worth wooing by considering other factors besides test scores, including work experiences, personal statements, letters of reference and undergraduate grades in specific courses, says Suinn.

In addition, diversity-friendly schools work hard to help students get funding for education and research, because they recognize that without it, some minority students wouldn't go to school, and without enough of it, financial pressures may distract them from their coursework—again, placing them at a disadvantage, faculty say.

Academics with a Purpose

Coursework at these institutions can look different too. Some departments require a certain number of courses on diversity-related issues, others infuse multicultural content throughout the entire curricula, and some do both.

CUNY Graduate Center faculty encourage students to think deeply in all of their classes about the way they conduct research, both methodologically and ethically, says Sara McClelland, a fourth-year student in the program.

"A striking difference between our program and others is how much we're trained to think through our methods—basically, who we study and why," she says. "Those kinds of questions are embedded throughout our entire training, so that diversity isn't just an add-on."

For instance, while a standard way to study the impact of sex education might be to examine its outcomes in young people in general, McClelland instead is looking at how sex-education policies are associated with such health outcomes as pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases in young people depending on their race, class, disability status, gender and geographical location.

Meanwhile, in more applied classes, Beatty's professors urge her to consider the impact of her work on the people she is studying. "You feel their commitment to social justice through their concern about how you are doing what you're doing," she says. "You can't just go out and do research that's not important and relevant to the population you're working with."

In fact, many successful programs are mission-driven, given that a main impetus behind them is to train psychologists who can more sensitively serve a greater segment of the country's population, others say.

ANPsych—which besides shoring up the Alaska Native psychology pipeline also gives tuition assistance to Alaska Native undergraduate and graduate students in psychology—is a case in point. The program's long-term aim is to ensure more and better mental health services for Alaska Natives, who have extremely high rates of alcoholism and suicide, notes ANPsych grantee Tonie Quaintance, a first-year doctoral student at UA-Anchorage and a member of the Oneida tribe in Wisconsin.

Native people trained in psychology can be especially effective agents in helping reduce these devastating social problems, Quaintance says, because they will do so in ways that are culturally appropriate, and that spring from Alaska Natives' own ideas about how to heal their communities.

'You're in Their Web'

Integral to students' academic success in these programs, faculty and students agree, is good mentoring. While research shows that such input makes a big difference for most graduate students, it may be especially important for those entering grad school from disadvantaged financial or other circumstances, says Wendy Silverman, PhD, a psychology professor at Florida International University (FIU), another 2006 Suinn award winner.

Silverman, who won a \$500,000, five-year National Institute of Mental Health award to mentor undergraduate and graduate Latina students at FIU, says she works to make the research enterprise interesting and relevant for her mentees, who often are the first females in their families to go to college—and therefore leery of science.

"The challenge is to get them to see the practical significance and applied value of psychological research," says Silverman. "Once they do, they really get into it." For example, she brings into class news stories about troubled or abused children, explaining that they are the very people students will be studying and helping.

At some diversity-friendly schools, mentorship isn't defined as one-on-one contact. When Beatty started at CUNY, she had not one, but eight potential mentors—the seven core faculty in the program, plus an outside mentor who specializes in a research area related to Beatty's dissertation. While she works with three main advisers on her research, all of the faculty check in on how she's doing, and she can turn to any of them for advice.

"You always feel like, even if you're not in their web, that you're in their web," Beatty says with a chuckle. "They tend to know what you're up to."

A Different Feel

As the above examples suggest, diversity-friendly programs have a different "feel" from more traditional doctoral programs: They're more flexible, cooperative, humanistic and democratic, and they focus on nurturing strengths, not remedying deficits.

"We don't think of bilingualism as a 'challenge,'" says Armando Piña, PhD, an assistant psychology professor at Arizona State University (ASU), which won the Suinn award in 2005. "Instead, we see it as an asset, as a way for students to enrich and have an impact on their community."

In fact, diversity-friendly schools are almost like a family, students and faculty add. Bonding events like potlucks are common, and students help each other through academic and personal difficulties. This sense of community "helps very much in helping students stay focused, do their work and help each other when they have personal

responsibilities," notes Piña a mentee of Silverman's who has gone on to share the fruits of that relationship with students at ASU.

In a truly successful program, everyone benefits, adds Michelle Fine, PhD, distinguished professor of psychology at the CUNY Graduate Center program.

"I think the real winners are those of use who are white," Fine says. "We get to be in a space where there are so many different ideas on the table. Together we learn how to do the best version of psychology we can do."