

Supporting Fair and Inclusive Graduate Programs

A Resource for
Faculty and Universities



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About the Report

In June 2023, with funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, CGS launched a project to support equity-minded graduate education in a changing legal landscape. In the wake of the Supreme Court's 2023 decision on higher education admissions, subsequent litigation in lower federal courts, and state policies, we sought to promote common understandings of legally sound practices for ensuring that all graduate students have fair opportunities to access, and succeed in, graduate programs. Developed specifically for graduate faculty, staff, and administrators, *Supporting Fair and Inclusive Graduate Programs: A Resource for Faculty and Universities*, is one of a series of tools developed through the Sloan-funded project. Learn more at www.cgsnet.org.

About the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS)

CGS is an association of approximately 460 graduate institutions that are dedicated to the advancement of graduate education and research. Working closely with our members, we advocate for graduate education, conduct innovative research, and develop best practices. Our projects generate information and data that help graduate deans, faculty and their institutions better support graduate students and programs.

About EGE Resource Center

The Equity in Graduate Education (EGE) Resource Center builds capacity for systemic change in graduate education by conducting and translating research that is inspired by community needs, and offering high-quality, evidence-based professional development that provides faculty and administrators with tools and resources to create and sustain institutional change.



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Contents

Acknowledgments	viii
Introduction.....	1
Definitions.....	4
Part I: Equity in Recruitment and Admissions	6
Collecting and using data that help identify equity gaps in applications, admissions and enrollment	8
<i>Spotlight: Using Outcomes Data to Test Beliefs about Merit</i>	8
Develop mutually beneficial partnerships with organizations and universities that expand your applicant pool.....	9
<i>Call-Out: Partnering with Community-Based, Cohort and Bridge Programs</i>	9
<i>Spotlight: Industry Partnerships with Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs)</i>	10
Align admissions criteria with program and institutional mission	10
<i>Spotlight: Using Personal Statement Prompts that Support University Mission</i>	11
Develop clear and consistent means for evaluating a range of academic and professional competencies in the admissions process	12
<i>Call-Out: A Review “Bridge” for Graduate Applications</i>	13
<i>Spotlight: Supporting Holistic Admissions in Programs with a Large Number of Applicants</i>	14
Seek and sharing materials that help faculty decision-makers avoid biases and develop awareness of equity issues	14
Give careful attention to processes for awarding aid	15
<i>Call-Out: Options for Awarding Aid Using a Legally Principled Method</i>	16
Part II: Program Environments that Support Student Success and Belonging.....	17
Assess program environments to understand a range of student experiences.....	19
<i>Spotlight: Fielding and Using Climate Surveys to Support Equitable Practice</i>	20
<i>Call-Out: Items from GradSERU Module on “Sense of Belonging”</i>	21
<i>Spotlight: A Tool to Assess Policies and Practices</i>	21

Communicate the institution's and program's commitments to welcoming and respectful environments for all students	22
<i>Spotlight: A Departmental Code of Conduct</i>	23
<i>Call-Out: Healthy Research Teams and Labs Initiative, University of Toronto and Council of Graduate Schools</i>	24
<i>Spotlight: Communicating with Integrity in Times of Change and Uncertainty</i>	25
Encourage and supporting student community-building within and outside the program	26
<i>Call-Out: A Note on Race-Based Affinity Groups</i>	27
Design inclusive learning opportunities to support the success of all students	27
<i>Spotlight: Developing Transparent Assessment Criteria for Program Milestones</i>	28
<i>Spotlight: Engaging Master's Students in Meeting Clear Learning Outcomes</i>	28
<i>Spotlight: Developing and Expanding Inclusive Practices</i>	29
Review institutional and program policies for graduate students with an eye toward removing unintended barriers	30
<i>Spotlight: Developing Policies that Eliminate Barriers to Success for a Broad Range of Students</i>	31
Prioritize student wellbeing, with attention to different types of student experiences	32
Part III: Supporting Good Mentoring for All	33
Develop shared expectations and processes for inclusive mentoring	34
<i>Spotlight: Practical Toolkit for Mentoring in Graduate Education</i>	35
<i>Spotlight: Testing Culturally Relevant Mentoring Compacts</i>	35
Develop processes for holding community members accountable for fair and high-quality mentoring practices	36
<i>Spotlight: Clear Expectations and Professional Standards for Graduate Student Mentors</i>	36
<i>Spotlight: Targeting Microaggressions Through Training and Data Collection</i>	37
Send the message that student success goes beyond academic advising and relies on a broad community of support	37
<i>Spotlight: Developing Programs that Match Students with Mentors outside their Department</i>	38
<i>Spotlight: Improving Graduate Student Well-Being through Improved Mentoring</i>	39
Part IV: Supporting Mission-Based Equity Goals in States with "DEI" Legislation and in New Federal Policy Environment	40
<i>Call-Out: Academic freedom in graduate education is vital to protect</i>	41
Conclusion: Expanding the Evidence Base on Equitable Practices in Graduate Education	44
Works Cited	46

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Foundational work for this report was led by CGS's legal thought partner, EducationCounsel, an organization that seeks to advance equitable education systems from early childhood through postsecondary education. We thank Jamie Lewis Keith, Distinguished Senior Law and Policy Fellow, and Art Coleman, Founding Partner, for their leadership and expertise.

Finally, the authors thank CGS staff members who supported the development of this work: Suzanne Ortega, CGS President, provided guidance and vision at every step of the project's evolution; Amy Scott, Associate Vice President of Government Relations and Public Affairs, reviewed and provided input on portions of this document; and Kelley Karnes and Sarah Breyfogle provided insight and support to project communications. We also thank former CGS staff member Brian McKenzie, who led the development of the focus group protocol that was used in the early phase of the project.

Introduction

Overview of the Legal Landscape

In June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned over 40 years of legal precedent related to higher education admissions policies (*Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* and *SFFA v. University of North Carolina*). In a decision applying to all public institutions and any institutions that receive federal funding, the Court held that providing educational diversity benefits for all students is no longer compelling under the Constitution and federal law outside of military academies. Consequently, it held that an individual's racial status may not be considered when making admissions decisions.

In the same ruling, however, the Court also explicitly held that institutions may consider the mission-related skills, lessons learned, character, and aspirations that individuals may gain from their lived experiences, including their experiences of race.¹ In other words, the *SFFA* decision placed constraints on the *means* by which universities may pursue diversity and equity, but the *goals* of equity and diversity, when rooted in university, college, and/or department/program missions, were deemed legally permissible under the Constitution and existing federal statutes. Such goals were even lauded as “worthy” and “commendable” in Chief Justice John Roberts’s majority opinion.²

As of late 2024, universities had devoted considerable resources to ensuring that their practices complied with the law of the land.³ In close collaboration with university legal counsel, graduate deans, faculty and other university administrators had worked to revise policy, update trainings of faculty and admissions professionals, and revise admissions materials. As of this report’s publication, however, Executive Orders and other policies issued by the Trump Administration in early 2025 are in tension with the Supreme Court’s decision. The starkest example of this tension appeared in a February 14, 2025 letter from the Acting Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, which attempted to expand the parameters of the decision to include any effort to consider and advance equity and diversity in education (Coleman, 2025; Garces, 2025).

1 The Court also reasoned that remedying an institution’s own intentional discrimination with continuing effects is legally compelling and could justify a race-based remedy when necessary.

2 The authors credit Jamie Lewis Keith of Education Counsel for this helpful distinction.

3 Meanwhile, since 2020, many states have proposed or enacted legislation or regents’ policies that apply to public institutions, defunding or outright prohibiting their programs, initiatives, jobs and offices that address race- and gender- related content, among other content, that promotes success and belonging for all students. Lower federal courts have found such content prohibitions in employment training and educational programs to violate or likely violate the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. See *Honeyfund.com v. DeSantis* (U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Florida, permanently enjoining application of the so-called Florida “anti-woke” law as a First Amendment violation as applied to private employment training, which was not appealed after the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit upheld the District Court’s preliminary injunction based on the likelihood of such violation) and *Pernell v. Lamb* (U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit upholding the District Court’s preliminary injunction against the Florida law’s application to education programs as a likely First Amendment violation, with the final outcome to be determined).

Federal policy at odds with federal law is not the equivalent of law. As of this report's publication, federal law has not changed since January 2025, although pending litigation may result in further legal developments over time. Institutions must comply with applicable law; but as federal policies are issued and court rulings are made, what that requires may take time to discern, and individual states and institutions will inevitably come to different interpretations.⁴ The principles and practices highlighted in this publication are based on careful analysis of the Supreme Court's decision and highlight strategies for advancing access and opportunity that are fair, relevant, and effective for all students. We urge universities to give special consideration to these principles as they work to uphold their missions.

Based on the 2023 SCOTUS decision, there remains much more that we can do, than cannot, to advance fairness and inclusion in graduate education and this is a critical time to actualize our commitments. With thoughtful reflection on the part of universities and their faculty, graduate programs can make pathways to and through graduate school easier to navigate for all students. It is important to note that a commitment to fairness and equity supports a wide variety of groups that have experienced barriers on their educational pathways. These may include students who are of the first generation in their families to pursue higher education, gender minorities in some fields (e.g., men in nursing, women in mathematics), rural students, veterans, low-income students, students with disabilities, and others. All aspiring students should be able to access information about educational opportunities and to compete for them on terms that are fair.

How this Resource Was Developed

With support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) has worked over the past 18 months to help graduate institutions support access and success in graduate education, drawing insights from legal experts in the field of higher education, graduate faculty, graduate deans, leaders of higher education organizations, and graduate education researchers. Based on focus groups held in Fall of 2023, CGS identified areas where faculty and institutions sought resources and support for advancing fair access and opportunities for all students to succeed. In a series of interviews with faculty and administrators, we identified promising practices, examples and resources.

This resource, *Supporting Fair and Inclusive Graduate Programs: A Resource for Faculty and Universities*, is one of two to be developed through this project. Providing promising practices in three areas—graduate recruitment and admissions, inclusive program cultures, and mentoring—it is designed to provide faculty and graduate program administrators with insights for making their programs fairer and more inclusive. The stakes of this work are high. Current U.S. graduate students will play a key role in strengthening and expanding the research and professional activities that touch every area of our lives. Whether working in universities or in industry, government, and non-profit sectors, today's graduate students will become the researchers and professionals working to improve the economy, support the ethical use of Artificial Intelligence, and develop new, life-saving technologies. To support our students and future workforce, we need to design programs that attract and support a broad spectrum of U.S. talent.

An earlier resource, *Navigating the Post-SFFA Landscape: Advancing Equity-Minded, Law-Attentive Priority Actions in Graduate, Undergraduate and Professional Higher Education ("Keith and Coleman")*, serves as a companion to this publication. Developed by EducationCounsel, a leader in the field of higher education law, this resource was designed to help higher education leaders, policymakers, and their legal counsel understand and navigate

⁴ The lawfulness and constitutionality of the letter and related Question and Answer document has been challenged in federal courts in three separate cases: *American Federation of Teachers v. U.S. Department of Education*, *National Education Association v. U.S. Department of Education*, and *the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) v. U.S. Department of Education*.

the 2023 Supreme Court’s *SFFA* decision. Education Counsel’s resource provides examples of the general types of policies and programmatic areas that are likely to be legally sustainable under established law or are supported by principled legal positions that are not yet clearly decided. Building on that foundation, the examples in this guide for faculty and institutions have been drawn from specific universities and programs. These contextualized, detailed examples demonstrate how programs of different types are continuing to pursue fairness in admissions and recruitment, to design inclusive program environments, and support strong mentoring for all. We provide references to this work throughout to assist institutions in using the two resources together.

As you consider these examples, we urge you to consult your own university’s legal counsel to ensure that any new or refined policies and programs are aligned with your institution’s mission and comprehensive efforts to provide educational opportunities that are fair, relevant and effective for all graduate students. As you do so, consider the importance of collecting data to identify barriers to access and success. With program-level data, it will be easier to address the needs of all groups that are experiencing gaps in access, opportunity, and success, while also enabling those who are already thriving to continue to do so.

While many universities and graduate programs have experienced major disruptions over the past five years, this moment also presents an opportunity for positive change in graduate education. The individuals consulted throughout our work demonstrated a willingness to think beyond practices that are based in tradition rather than evidence. They also demonstrated a deep commitment to the success of all their graduate students. We hope that you will find this an inspiring and useful resource as you work to advance the quality of graduate education at your institution.



Definitions

Equity is a core concept of this resource and for many institutions, central to their educational mission. To support students from all backgrounds, we must develop equitable education systems, or “those that ensure the achievement of educational potential is not the result of personal and social circumstances” (OECD, 2023). While the concept has been defined in different ways, *“equity” is used throughout this report to describe practices that are fair, relevant and effective for all students.*

For universities and their leaders to pursue these goals in an authentic, mission-driven way, they need to give careful thought to the roles of faculty, staff, and administrators. To provide context for our discussion of university-wide and program-level actions, we provide two additional definitions related to the concept of equity in higher education.

Where an institution’s data reveal that gaps exist for some groups and not others, fairness demands that attention be paid to addressing all such gaps. As theorized by Posselt (2020), **equity work** requires us to make changes in the larger cultures and systems in which graduate education takes place. In practice, this frequently entails barrier removal, revisiting inherited notions about who “the best students” are in recruitment and admission processes, and cultivating trusting, respectful relationships with all students by creating healthy learning and work environments (Posselt et al., 2020). Equity work is made possible by equity-minded professionals. **Equity-mindedness** stands in contrast to an approach where faculty and staff do not acknowledge or seek to change exclusionary practices (Bensimon, 2007).

A growing number of scientific and higher education institutions are already working to put decades of equity research into practice. With a focus on postsecondary education, the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s STEMM Equity Achievement (SEA) Change initiative provides tools for colleges, universities, and departments to perform evidence-based self-assessments and create action plans for a more diverse, equitable and inclusive environment where all talent can thrive in the disciplines of Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine. More recently, the NSF and Sloan-funded Equity in Graduate Education Resource Center has developed a national consortium and research-practice partnerships that translate high-quality research into accessible formats such as guides, tools, and workshops. Both initiatives have made significant, measurable progress toward improving equity in higher education, and we encourage readers to access and learn from their efforts.

The current resource complements and builds upon this and other work by situating it in the context of the 2023 SFFA decision and other aspects of the current social and legal landscape. Our goals are to help faculty, staff and administrators develop more confidence in the areas of equity-minded practice that are legally sustainable and to provide concrete examples that can be adapted and adopted on other campuses.

As noted above, the practices and examples we provide in this document are designed to support greater access and support for a wide variety of groups that face heightened barriers to access and opportunities in higher education. The highlighted examples also do not harm students who are already finding success and satisfaction in graduate school; they are focused on including all talent. This approach counters the often logically flawed understanding of diversity as a “zero-sum game,” where one group can only advance at the expense of another. Rather, equitable design allows universities to make selection and training processes more thoughtful and evidence-based, and it helps faculty create program environments that are stronger and supportive of all students.



PART 1

Equity in Recruitment and Admissions

The Post-SFFA Legal Context for Recruitment and Admissions

As noted earlier, in June of 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court prohibited the consideration of an applicant's racial status as a factor in a holistic admissions process when educational diversity benefits for all students, as long defined, is the aim. While in some states, public referenda and state executive orders had already restricted the use of racial status in public higher education admissions decisions (AAAS & EducationCounsel, 2021; Espinosa et al., 2015), in most U.S. states, the ruling represented a change in law pertaining to undergraduate, graduate and professional school admissions.

At the same time, the 2023 *SFFA* ruling also explicitly provided universities with two pathways for continuing to support universally beneficial educational diversity and equity goals (Keith & Coleman, 2024). First, the ruling affirmed that universities may still define their own missions within constitutional limits, and it described educational diversity and equity interests as “commendable,” “worthy,” and legal. This ruling protects the mission-based educational diversity and equity goals found at many U.S. institutions. Second, universities may also consider “what a student gained from their experience of race if relevant to the institution’s or a program’s mission” (Keith & Coleman, p. 7-9), “race-neutral” aims and criteria (e.g., socio-economic, first generation, under-resourced school backgrounds), as well as inclusive barrier removal and recruitment without material benefits provided to some races but not others (Keith & Coleman, p. 8-9).

While universities have broadly communicated these principles in campus memos and trainings, it is not always clear to faculty how they should be implemented in specific graduate programs. The current legal environment, which includes ongoing threats of lawsuits and overly broad interpretations of the substance and reach of the *SFFA* decision, may also contribute to doubt and uncertainty on the part of faculty. The decentralized nature of graduate admissions (Kent and McCarthy, 2016) adds further complexity to this environment. Even within the same institution, and among thoughtful professionals, an understanding of good practice in recruitment and admissions may vary considerably.

In the subsections below, we provide examples of university-wide and program-level strategies for recruitment and admissions that demonstrate a high level of attention to issues of equitable access and opportunity for all; these practices also align with each university’s internal, post-*SFFA* policies. It is important to note that many of the practices developed within these programs preceded the *SFFA* decision. Indeed, many of these activities reflected broader university and program-level commitments to systemic change in graduate education that improve training effectiveness and remove barriers for talented students. Some of these practices are grounded in recent research and best practices in holistic admissions and draw from principles that, in general, can still be applied in current legal contexts. In some cases, these efforts needed to be revised, but not completely reinvented, in light of *SFFA* and state-based legal contexts. As noted above, we encourage faculty to consult with their university’s graduate school and legal counsel to ensure that their own approach aligns with institutional policy.

In our interviews with universities and programs, several themes emerged around admissions, namely, the importance of 1) using data to test assumptions about who would succeed in the program; 2) providing greater structure and transparency to the admissions process, such as identifying desired skills and attributes needed to succeed and using rubrics to assess them; and 3) providing students with a broader range of opportunities to demonstrate strengths and attributes, beyond test scores and academic transcripts. These principles are consistent with good practice in holistic review, a process that considers a wide range of applicant attributes in a structured manner (Kent and McCarthy, 2016; Posselt, 2016) and which was endorsed by the Supreme Court (*Grutter vs. Bollinger*, 2003). As one administrator put it, “[With holistic admissions,] we’re selecting on many different parameters that demonstrate ability to be successful in graduate education, but then also alignment with some of the values and priorities of the institution, but more specifically the academic programs.”

Below we highlight examples of practices that were referenced in our interviews with faculty and administrators, organized under the themes above:

Using Data to Test Assumptions

- Collecting data on the relationship between admissions criteria and student outcomes. For example, a university might use historical data to understand whether there was a meaningful difference in the performance of students above and below a certain GPA threshold.
- Eliciting information that allows admissions committees to contextualize decision-making about a student’s past academic performance (e.g. working a full-time job while completing undergraduate study).
- Making the GRE optional or removing it completely as an application requirement in cases where data do not support its use.

Improving Structure and Transparency

- Developing or customizing rubrics for the review of applications for admission.
- Linking admissions criteria to program and institutional mission.
- Implementing official admissions committees where informal review processes are presently used.
- Providing faculty with training in the use of rubrics and procedures that support fair admissions processes.
- Developing structured protocols for interviews, with a bank of questions provided to create consistency across interviews and providing recommendations for modalities of interviews (e.g. virtual) that avoid privileging some candidates over others.

Expanding Ways for Prospective Students to Demonstrate Strengths

- Developing a summer research program that is open to all students to give those who need extra research experience a chance to connect with faculty and demonstrate their skills.
- Identifying specific competencies and skills needed to succeed in programs and providing candidates with multiple opportunities on the application to demonstrate those competencies (e.g. an application essay that invites candidate to discuss professional and other experiences that will support their success in the program).

In the area of recruitment, our interviewees highlighted a variety of approaches to broadening the pool of applicants and helping potential or admitted students get to know the program and institutional environment before matriculating. For example, a number of programs created ambassador programs to allow prospective students to connect with current students and form connections on campus. Such connections can be essential for students who are the first generation in their families to pursue a graduate degree or who may worry that they won’t be welcomed or belong.

Building upon themes from the interviews, we highlight six practice areas that were identified as critically important to advancing equitable practice in the areas of recruitment and admissions and provide examples from campuses and programs.

Practice 1: Collect and use data that help identify equity gaps in applications, admissions and enrollment.

The graduate admissions process is often built on long-established notions of merit that have not been carefully examined (Posselt, 2016). A lack of evidence connecting admissions criteria and student outcomes may lead some graduate institutions to continue admitting students based on untested assumptions about a student's ability to succeed in a program. In a 2016 CGS study, 81% of respondents to a survey of graduate school staff reported that more data were needed to establish the link between admissions criteria and student success (Kent & McCarthy, 2016). This publication recommended that universities "gather and analyze department-specific data on graduate admissions," noting that programs can use these data to "identify gender- and race-based patterns in admitted and rejected student characteristics and test whether evidence of student outcomes supports prevailing assumptions about who is likely to succeed" (Kent & McCarthy, 2016, p. v).

Post-SFFA, new caution is needed about collecting student racial demographic data as part of the recruitment and admissions process to assure that the data are used for legally valid purposes and not to select students based on racial status. The program spotlight below exemplifies the practice of data-informed outreach and recruitment. It also demonstrates how data can be used to test a prevailing assumption about who will succeed in the program as well as to broaden the applicant pool.

SPOTLIGHT: Using Outcomes Data to Test Beliefs about Applicant Merit

PhD program in Physics, Public R-1 Institution

In recent years, this institution's PhD program in Physics made a strategic effort to revise its admissions process. Their approach was grounded in data showing that there was little correlation between Physics GRE scores and first-year grades. In 2017, the program made the Physics GRE optional, and in the year following this change in policy, the program saw a 44% increase in the number of Black/African American applicants, an 80% increase in the number of Latine applicants, and a 33% increase in the number of female applicants. The overall pool of applicants increased by 20% over the same period. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the program extended its test-optional policy to the general GRE test.

Increases in the diversity of the applicant pool contributed to broadened opportunities for students to compete for admission. The program saw larger numbers of women students, and soon, the department's Open House was able to hold a break-out session focused on the subject of women in Physics and related issues, which was open to any applicants who were interested in participating.

In the 14 years since 2010 (2011-2024), these approaches, within a competitive admissions process, have resulted in significant increases to the matriculation of women and other groups that have faced barriers to participation. Between 2011 and 2024, the program increased by nearly four times the number of Black, Indigenous and Latine students admitted in the previous 14-year period, and it increased their completion rate from 50% to 88%. Also in the period 2011-2024, the program increased the number of women matriculating in the program by approximately 150% and increased this group's completion rate from 83% to 93%.

Practice 2: Develop mutually beneficial partnerships with organizations and universities that expand your applicant pool.

Within a robust general outreach program, pursue targeted outreach to students of color to build a diverse and inclusive applicant pool. Keep outreach separate from the evaluation and decision-making process.

– Keith & Coleman, 2024, p. 13.

We have all heard colleagues say that they would like to admit a more diverse student cohort, but their program does not receive enough applications from students from non-traditional or minoritized backgrounds—whether that includes students who are the first generation in their families to pursue a higher education degree, students from racially minoritized backgrounds, or women. Our interviews with program faculty and administrators made clear that it is critical for faculty and administrators not to accept this situation as a reality over which they have no control. Passive approaches to recruitment—waiting for students who already know about your program through their own social and professional networks to apply—will typically yield the same results, year after year.

By and large, our interviewees recognized the need to take proactive steps to expand their applicant pools. Research on the “business case” for diversity suggests that broad educational diversity is more likely to result from a broader applicant pool and enhance the quality of programs for all students (Page, 2017; McKinsey, 2023). Our discussions with graduate program faculty and administrators highlighted the importance of building new relationships with an expanded network of institutions while maintaining existing institutional relationships. This practice simultaneously helps to increase faculty familiarity with different types of undergraduate programs and expand undergraduate students’ awareness and interest in graduate institutions to which they might not otherwise apply. Several interviewees highlighted the importance of building relationships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), in particular, through “bridge” programs such as those sponsored by disciplinary societies under the [Inclusive Graduate Education Network](#) or through home-grown relationships with local institutions.

Partnering with Community-Based, Cohort & Bridge Programs

Awareness-raising focused on students who may not know about opportunities to compete for participation in programs is important for building broadly inclusive applicant pools. Institutions may “target outreach to students in community-based cohort and bridge programs to build an inclusive applicant pool for admission, scholarships, research programs, etc.” In addition, institutions may authentically value and consider the skills, knowledge, character, inspiration, and aspirations that any individual student may gain from their participation in these and other preparatory programs “without making assumptions about all students who participate” in any particular program. (Keith and Coleman, p. 17)

Attending outreach events designed for students from backgrounds that have long faced heightened barriers to participation in a field was also cited as a critical strategy. Doing so, while also continuing robust engagement with students and schools that are already aware of the program, is important for equitable access and opportunity. One Engineering faculty member specifically highlighted her program’s participation in the conference of the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) and ABRCMS: “I think that has been a really important part for increasing the pool of our applicants, because we can only admit those who apply.”

Graduate programs at public institutions in states with “DEI” legislation or regents’ policies, either pending or passed, may face additional recruitment challenges. While national data are not yet available showing the impact of such legislation and policies on recruitment and enrollment trends at the graduate level, anecdotal evidence suggests that students may perceive campuses in such states to offer a less welcoming environment. Despite these restrictions, universities have persisted in their efforts to support equitable access in ways that comply with federal and state law.

At one public R-1 institution, a workforce development program brings undergraduate students from a range of institutions, including Minority-Serving Institutions, to campus for learning and research opportunities in engineering (see spotlight below). This opportunity introduces undergraduates to faculty at an institution with large graduate programs, expanding their networks and deepening their research experiences.

SPOTLIGHT: Industry Partnerships with Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) **College of Engineering, Public R-1 Institution**

At this public R-1 Institution, two major industry partners fund a hybrid program with Minority-Serving Institutions and the university’s College of Engineering. The program addresses a national need for more engineers with experience in robotics and Artificial Intelligence (AI) while creating benefits for all institutional partners. The R-1 university’s collaboration with five institutions—some of which are MSIs—is designed to pool the respective areas of experience and capacities of all participating institutions. A variety of groups benefit: students at the public R-1 have the opportunity to learn and interact with students from a variety of educational backgrounds, instructors at the teaching-focused partner institutions share their expertise, and students at all institutions develop new contacts and relationships.

Universities seeking to broaden their applicant pool can also seek support through the Council of Graduate Schools’ **National Name Exchange** (NNE), which provides information about graduate school to students seeking information about applying and matriculating. Universities participating in NNE can use the program to expand their recruitment lists, while student participants receive information and resources that will help them navigate the process of applying to graduate school (NNE, n.d.).

Practice 3: Align admissions criteria with program and institutional mission.

Many graduate institutions use qualitative approaches to gather information about how a student applicant contributes to institutional or graduate program mission-related access and opportunity, inclusion of all talent, and educational diversity goals. This practice is in line with Keith and Coleman’s recommendation to use “essay questions, interview questions or letters of recommendations for information [...] to explore a student’s actions, skills or knowledge on issues of race or inclusion, equitable access/opportunity, and educational diversity related to mission” as opposed to considering a student’s racial status independent of lived experience (Keith & Coleman, 2024). The personal statement prompts used at Cornell University is an example of how admissions criteria have been aligned with university mission and core values.

SPOTLIGHT: Using Personal Statement Prompts that Support University Mission

Cornell University

In 2020, Cornell provided an opportunity for its graduate programs to require an Academic Statement of Purpose and a Personal Statement from all applicants to support a more holistic review of their applicants. In 2023, Cornell made a data-informed decision for all its graduate programs to require both statements. The Cornell academic statement of purpose prompt focuses on the applicant's academic background, professional experiences, intellectual goals, and how these align with the priorities of the program.

In all degree programs, Cornell seeks students who will contribute to advancing Cornell's founding principle to be "*an institution where any person can find instruction in any study*" and institutional core values. Consequently, Cornell's personal statement prompt focuses on who the applicant is as a whole person, how their background and experiences influenced their decision to pursue graduate study, and their potential to contribute to a community *where any person in any study* can learn and work productively and positively together.

Recognizing that success in graduate study for any student requires both persistence and resilience, Cornell's personal statement prompt provides applicants with an opportunity to share how their personal, academic, and/or professional experiences demonstrate their ability to be both persistent and resilient, especially when navigating challenging circumstances. Additionally, it explicitly provides applicants with an opportunity to provide contextual details on any perceived gaps in their academic record. In combination, the requirement of an academic statement of purpose and a personal statement from all applicants contributes to a more holistic review for all students.

When a department or program has a history of giving exclusive weight to past academic performance or test scores, it can undermine broader and more meaningful definitions of merit, intelligence, and student potential that may strengthen the graduate student body and thus the graduate program at large. As a graduate education leader at a master's-focused institution noted, expanding ideas of merit involves getting more specific about what it means to be successful in a graduate program and subsequent career. Their university has used learning outcomes for specific programs to realign scales used to evaluate students. For example, one of the key roles and learning goals for students in the Master of Social Work (MSW) program is for students to be able to situationally assess crisis situations in their professional lives as social workers. The program's personal statement prompt therefore invites students to discuss how they have used this skill in their past experiences.

Practice 4: Develop clear and consistent means for evaluating a range of academic and professional competencies in the admissions process.

One of the defining qualities of holistic review is consideration of a comprehensive set of review criteria that can be demonstrated by students in a range of credible ways. It is incumbent on programs to define relevant criteria that are mission-relevant and legally permissible. Equally important is to evaluate for those criteria consistently. The 2023 *SFFA* decision made a clear distinction between the consideration of racial status (group membership) in the review of applications for admission and the consideration of gains, inspiration, and aspirations that an individual acquired from their lived experiences of many kinds, including race-related experiences. The ruling requires that clear connections be made between race-related experiences and personal, professional, or intellectual qualities that the university and program are seeking.

The Court expressly permitted considering the lessons learned (which should include knowledge), skills and character qualities (such as leadership and courage), that an individual student may gain from their own lived experience of race. At the same time, the Court cautioned institutions not to make assumptions about what a student's experience of race is, or what a student gained, based on their racial status. For example, favorable consideration of 'a student who overcame racial discrimination must be tied to that student's courage or determination.' Similarly, the Court advised that 'a benefit to a student whose heritage or culture motivated him or her to assume a leadership role or attain a particular goal must be tied to that student's unique ability to contribute to the university'—not to 'the color of their skin.'

– Keith & Coleman, 2024, p. 8.

The distinction between racial identity and what individual has gained from race-related experiences is an important one for graduate admissions committees (and committees for other selection processes) to understand, and many universities have provided training to faculty in this area. At one private R-1 institution, for example, graduate faculty are provided with a review “bridge” (below) that helps faculty understand the connections that must be made in the consideration of an applicant’s race-related experiences.

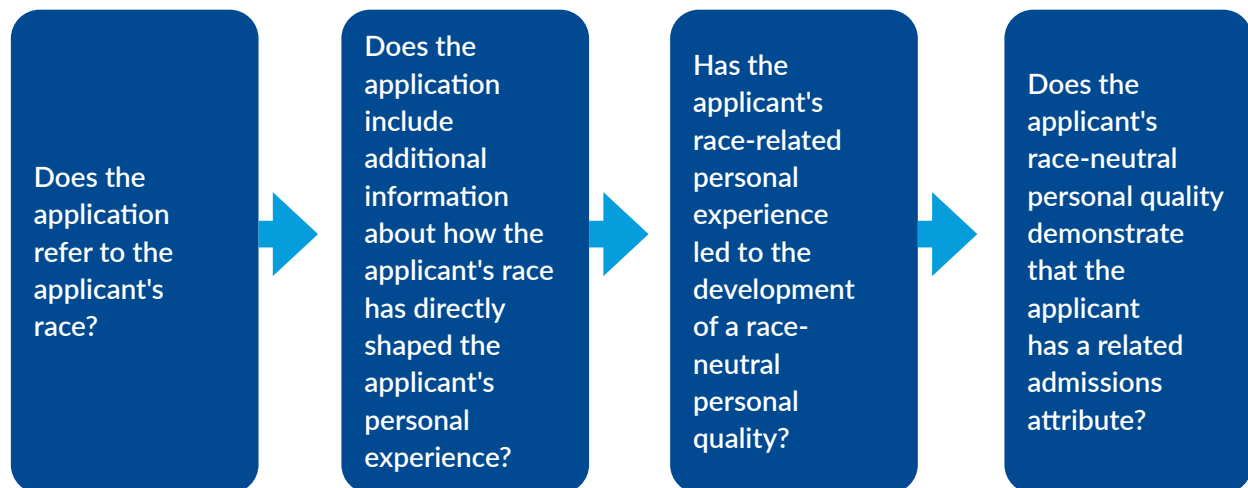


A Review “Bridge” for Graduate Applications

Private R-1 university

At this private R-1 university, the Office of the General Counsel has ensured that the review of graduate application materials is based on the following principles:

- The standards for admissibility, or “admission attributes,” must be race-neutral and drawn from the institution’s mission; in the case of graduate programs, admission attributes may also be related to the standards set forth within the discipline and the specific academic program.
- Students (or their recommendation letters) may describe how they gained skills, knowledge, and character qualities from their own lived experiences, and these may be expressly tied to their racial identity so long as the qualities demonstrate the relevant “admissions attributes.” This is an individual assessment of the applicant’s *experiences* and may not be based on stereotyped assumptions.
- Reviewers must consistently apply a standard evaluation methodology when race emerges in an application, only considering it to the extent that there is a direct connection (a “*bridge*”) to how it has shaped the applicant in a manner that makes them more admissible.



It is important to note that this bridge can be used in review of applicants of any race whose racial identity or race-related experience becomes known—whether in an application essay, interview, letter of recommendation, or otherwise. For example, in the same way that a Black applicant might write about the knowledge, awareness and skills he developed conducting research on health disparities for African Americans, a white applicant might write about the knowledge, awareness and skills she developed working in a clinical setting in an African American neighborhood. Both of these race-related experiences could be tied to the development of characteristics and understanding that a graduate program and institution found desirable. In terms of knowledge, these might include understanding of gaps in care or research on underserved communities; in terms of professional or personal characteristics, these might include empathy, leadership, or perseverance.

Rubrics are an evidence-based tool that can support holistic review. To apply multiple criteria consistently and clearly, graduate programs should develop or adopt rubrics that make clear the desirable qualities that are sought in candidates, operationalize what those qualities mean in applications, and tie these to institution and program mission. Rubrics ensure more consistent review of applicants along multiple criteria, and they help clarify shared expectations for what constitutes quality at different levels, on those criteria. [A checklist to support the development and self-assessment of equity-minded admissions rubrics](#) is offered by the Equity in Graduate Education Resource Center.

SPOTLIGHT: Supporting Holistic Admissions in Programs with a Large Number of Applicants

Division of Psychology, Private R-1 University

The Graduate School at this private R-1 university strongly recommends and supports the use of holistic review, and the Division of Psychology has adopted a policy that requires holistic review of all graduate programs in the Division. To facilitate review of a large number of applications (~500-900), the Division uses a supplemental survey that helps to quantify students' performance on items within the rubric, while also gathering data on factors (e.g., adversities, limited opportunities) that may influence the competitiveness of an application. For example, an "adversity" might be that a student's undergraduate institution offered limited opportunities to gain research experience. Multiple pathways are provided for applicants to maximize opportunities to rise to the top, including traits desired by the PhD program, such as determination and resiliency, which can be demonstrated by students' abilities to overcome adversities. The Division also has a policy of not accepting standardized exams, such as the GRE, as part of the admissions process. For interviews of graduate students, faculty are required to develop and use a standard set of questions that are asked of all applicants.

Practice 5: Seek and share materials that help faculty decision-makers avoid biases and develop awareness of other equity-related issues.

One hallmark of an equitable graduate program is awareness of bias—and efforts to mitigate it. Research shows that biases appear in a variety of processes, including in how faculty do or do not reply to email inquiries from prospective students, how applications for admission are reviewed by individuals and then discussed by committees, how they assess writing, support students' network development, and much more.

One type of bias involves making automatic associations between social categories and individual qualities (e.g., male/female, Black/White, old/young) and evaluations or value judgments (e.g., good/bad, smart/dumb). Also called implicit bias, it refers to attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Encompassing both favorable and unfavorable assessments, these biases are activated involuntarily—often without our awareness or intent.

Another type of bias involves double standards or holding people from one group to different expectations of performance than another other. This type of bias, which is also usually unconscious, has been found to occur in hiring contexts. Applicants of color may be subjected to additional "filters" that white candidates are not. In the PhD admissions context, a large study found evidence that applicants from China were expected to have higher standardized test scores than applicants from other groups, because of the long history and culture of test preparation there (Posselt, 2016).

Faculty may also hold conscious beliefs as professionals that involve bias. Posselt (2016) also found that risk aversion shaped how faculty judged applicants, and that faculty held racialized and gendered assumptions about what qualities and which applicants represented a risk. Similarly, scholars have found that ideas about “fit” often undermine chances for minoritized applicants. Even if a group consciously decides that fit should be a criterion, they may not recognize how it biases them against applicants who would bring diversity—simply because they are different.

Therefore, academic departments should take active efforts to raise attention to the various ways and places that biases may appear. They should also create mechanisms to reduce the chances that bias compromises the fairness of evaluations. One simple way to do so is to discuss the issue and raise attention to the ubiquity of bias. A study in economics found that people who think of themselves as unbiased were actually more likely to exhibit biases in practice than those who acknowledged they may have bias (Uhlmann, et al., 2007).

The humility to accept one’s potential bias may be one of the best safeguards against individual bias, but organizations can build “equity-checks” into standard practices as well. They can critically discuss what is meant by words like “risk” and “fit,” for example; they can track whether some groups are being disproportionately filtered at specific points in review processes. And, as discussed above, rubrics can also help structure judgment. They do so by focusing attention of reviewers on the criteria that a group has decided are worth using as the basis for distributing opportunities. Finally, having open discussions about the validity and embedded biases within criteria may help faculty either reconsider their use of certain criteria or define them with greater specificity. [Workshops by the Equity in Graduate Education Resource Center](#) offer research-based, professionally facilitated opportunities for reflection and dialogue among faculty, as well as tools for checking biases in admissions, recruitment, mentoring, and more.

Practice 6: Give careful attention to processes for awarding aid.

There is no doubt that financial aid for graduate education in the form of scholarships, research and teaching assistantships, and fellowships involves a variety of equity considerations. Some students, regardless of race/ethnicity, will be unable to participate in graduate programs without the benefit of significant financial support.

As noted in EducationCounsel’s companion resource, benefits such as financial aid are receiving greater scrutiny from graduate institutions post-*SFFA*. While the ruling focused on the factual setting of admissions, the principles of non-discrimination law applied in this case—particularly (but not exclusively) the need for a legally “compelling” interest to justify considering an individual’s racial status—also apply to conferral of other opportunities and benefits, including financial aid. Financial support and other non-admissions programs are already the focus of higher education legal cases in lower federal courts.⁵ In general, a key guiding principle is to use race-neutral criteria such as financial need to award aid. Another principle is to align highly valued admissions criteria with those used for other programs, including financial aid awards.

Throughout our interviews, processes for awarding aid received relatively little attention compared to other topics. This may be due to the fact the SCOTUS decision more directly addressed the topic of admissions. Drawing from Keith and Coleman (14-17), below we highlight three approaches to the awarding of aid that universities may employ in a principled manner. Again, it is essential for faculty and administrators to consult with university legal counsel to develop a principled and mission-focused approach.

5 Principles of legally sustainable program design in the area of awarding benefits such as aid are provided on pages 8 and 14-17 of EducationCounsel’s resource.

Options for Awarding Aid using a Legally Principled Method

Adapted from Keith and Coleman

Scholarships/Stipends. Award graduate scholarships, stipends and associated teaching and research training, as well as professional school scholarships, using race-neutral criteria. Provide undergraduate scholarships that are all or predominantly need-based with a demonstration of authentic commitment to economic equity as the priority aim.

Providing Access to Third-Party Scholarships. Making students aware of third-party scholarships involving race status-based qualification criteria that are offered by entities that are not legally part of the university (the university provides no funding, design, implementation or unique marketing support) is likely to be legally viable when properly handled. In the context of marketing efforts, an IHE may list such funding opportunities for students along with all other outside funding opportunities for the same or similar educational programs. IHEs may provide a list of admitted students who might qualify to outside funders if the same list is provided to all outside funding sources (check with your legal counsel to satisfy any pre-conditions that FERPA may impose).

Pool and Match Stipend/Aid Dollars. If the program assures the same stipend to all graduate students, it can fund some with external donor funds prioritizing students of a particular racial identity group, as long as this funding is not tied to the number of students of particular races admitted or whether any particular student is admitted. An institution may also choose to create a central pool of graduate (multi-field with same stipend) or undergraduate research funding/stipends/scholarships, with a high proportion of race-neutral and a low proportion of race status-based funds. In either approach, students are chosen using authentic neutral criteria, and the amount, type, and benefits awarded are also chosen using neutral criteria. In this way, the university may fund all who are selected, but match funds to selected students by first allocating the race-based funds to those who qualify, freeing more unrestricted funds for the rest and expanding funds available to everyone.

The use of fee waivers for graduate applications and compensating students for the cost of campus visits or prospective student weekends are also two common methods of removing barriers for students facing financial barriers to graduate study. Based on the principles outlined in *SFFA*, universities and programs need to ensure that they confer these benefits without regard to a student's racial status.

PART II

Program Environments that Support Student Success and Belonging

Graduate programs are an important locus for systemic change in STEM graduate education. Considerably smaller and less complex than the universities in which they are housed, graduate programs comprise relatively fewer relationships and communities. Taken together, however, their networks of actors (graduate program directors, faculty and graduate students, alongside postdoctoral scholars and staff) have considerable impact on the access, success and wellbeing of graduate students, and substantive changes in systems and norms can often be made internally within programs.

Making systemic changes at the program level is an important strategy for improving equitable access, opportunity, experience, and outcomes. Inclusive barrier removal and outreach, a central aspect of systemic change, is also more likely to be sustainable and effective, come what may in states with “DEI” legislation and a new federal policy context. A university and its programs can and should pursue opportunities to **design inclusive program structures** and **remove systemic barriers** for students who have long faced barrier to participation (Keith & Coleman, 2024). Generally speaking, these areas of intervention are legally sound and, when rigorously implemented, have a high likelihood of improving outcomes for all students.

Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) may end or redesign policies, systems, and norms that particularly disadvantage students of color, economically disadvantaged students, first-generation students, and students from under-resourced IHEs[...]" and "ends an offending policy in a way that eliminates disadvantage for everyone who is affected . . . (even if most are students of color)—but doesn't end benefits that some races enjoy under it.

– Keith & Coleman, 2024, p. 18

As noted in our earlier section on definitions of equity, redesigning systems to improve equitable access and opportunity for all talent differs from an approach that focuses on individual students moving through the system. The point is not to help students who face heightened barriers to “fit in” to an environment that does not recognize or support them. The goal is to change the system—including its policies and norms—to support the success of all students (those facing heightened barriers and lack of information, as well as those already well-informed and well-positioned to succeed). That said, such an approach must be focused: attuned to the misalignment of specific standard practices with the needs of specific groups. EducationCounsel’s companion resource provides a range of examples of policies and programs that support inclusion and systemic barrier removal.

In this section, we focus on specific ways that programs are seeking to make program environments more equitable and inclusive, grounding their practices in recent research on creating equitable program environments. Many of these practices align with EducationCounsel's areas of intervention for "barrier removal:"

- building capacity of professors and TAs in the knowledge and skills that constitute inclusive pedagogy;
- creating more flexible degree trajectory schedules and family-related leave policies;
- aligning timing of admission offers with scholarship, fellowship, and stipend offers;
- attending to affordability, food insecurity, homelessness, and financial precarity;
- redesigning mentoring and research experiences to be not only available but accessible and relatable for all students;
- enhancing transparency and access for student exchanges, pathways, and transfers, designing policies and programs to benefit all students.

– adapted from Keith & Coleman, p. 18

Because the redesign of mentoring structures has a particularly important impact on the graduate student experience, we devote the third section of this resource to the topic.

Policies and Programs that Support Belonging

A sense of belonging within one's graduate program is an essential factor in graduate student retention and success. While a sense of belonging may seem like a highly subjective experience, it has been positively associated with specific student experiences such as a perceived harmony of values between an individual and the community; the existence of professional networks; positive mentoring experiences; and the degree to which microaggressions and microaffirmations are experienced (O'Meara et al., 2017).

For first-generation and minoritized students, developing a sense of belonging within a program may also depend upon the ability to reliably decode its implicit norms and values (Lovitts, 2007). Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley have shown that ambiguity is a "double whammy" for women and underrepresented minorities. An environment of unclear expectations may lead to an increase in biased decision-making on the part of faculty while also negatively impacting the performance of minoritized students working to understand what is expected of them (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2017).

These studies suggest that clear and transparent norms are central to equitable practice; fairness depends on clear and consistently applied rules. In particular, the Berkeley research team has found a positive relationship between a high level of program structure and equitable outcomes for minoritized students as measured by student reports of psychological wellbeing and metrics of academic performance (Fisher et al., 2019). In other words, minoritized students (on any number of bases) may be more likely to succeed and thrive in programs that clearly and transparently communicate expectations and norms and apply these norms consistently. Of course, such clarity benefits everyone and harms no one. Students who already have the experience and social capital for awareness of unarticulated norms have their knowledge affirmed, and those who do not have the knowledge receive the opportunity to gain it.

In our interviews with program faculty, we sought to elicit specific examples of and insights about efforts to make program expectations clear, transparent and consistent and to provide educational opportunities to faculty and students that would provide all students with a common frame of reference. In addition, we also asked questions about the flexibility and sensitivity of stated values, policies and structures to issues of equitable access, opportunity, experience and outcomes for all students. Through synthesis of our interviews and a review of past work on equity and belonging, we identified six important practices for supporting clear and equitable cultures that all students are well-positioned to navigate.

Practice 1: Assess program environments to understand a range of student experiences.

The power differential between students and faculty can make it hard to understand student experiences without assessment efforts that promise anonymity. In many graduate programs, there is no systematic effort to assess program environments. While some programs conduct exit surveys, these evaluations, taken alone, are given too late to make improvements for the students leaving the program.

Climate surveys are an important tool for understanding the experiences of graduate students and how these may vary depending on a range of factors—phase of study, gender, disability status, first-generation status and socio-economic background, and race/ethnicity, among others. Some universities have collaborated on efforts to implement program-level surveys of climate and to benchmark results against a cohort of similar universities. For example, the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium provides a graduate student survey (“GradSERU”) with different modules on the student experience, such as financial support, advising, teaching and research experience, program climate, student wellbeing and obstacles to completion. While program climate surveys are often administered by an external unit such as the graduate school, programs should play a role in encouraging students to participate, communicating results to their communities and using the data to inform improvements to the student experience.



SPOTLIGHT: Fielding and Using Climate Surveys to Support Equitable Practice

College of Science and Engineering and Department of Art History, Public R-1 Institution

This public R-1 institution uses GradSERU, a climate survey, to understand the graduate student experience. Programs make a habit of promoting GradSERU to students and informing students when results are used to effect change. In Spring 2023, this practice garnered a 60.3% response rate among PhD students and a 27.4% response rate among research master's students. Survey results are available via a data dashboard to all members of the university, including students. Responses can be broken down by identity group, including but not limited to race and ethnicity, gender identification, disability status, and first-generation status. While data can be aggregated up to the campus level, given sufficient responses, they can also be shared at the college and program levels. Program-level data tend to be more actionable and receive greater consideration from faculty.

For some units, GradSERU is just the starting point for improving the graduate student environment. Programs that excel in a given area are consulted and best practices are shared across programs within the College. GradSERU was also foundational when the Department of Art History, with support from the Graduate School Diversity Office, fielded its own climate survey over the course of a calendar year. The department surveyed and held listening sessions with current students, alumni, staff, current and former faculty, and individuals who exited without a degree. These data were combined with aggregated GradSERU data to produce a climate report. The department incorporated anonymized quotes into the report to humanize the findings and make the content “feel more like people and less like data points.” Survey-generated solutions from the report serve as action items and drive the priorities of a departmental committee dedicated to equitable access and opportunity, inclusive learning and research environments, and educational diversity benefiting everyone.

Bringing graduate students into the discussion on climate is important to the university. According to one administrator, there is constant conversation around “how do we incorporate feedback more and how do we incorporate transparency more so that students feel heard and affirmed and understood in what their needs are.” In line with this value, the Graduate School actively promotes an exercise to Directors of Graduate Studies in which graduate students analyze and prioritize the GradSERU results for their programs. The activity involves an hour-long meeting where graduate students are broken into small groups and assigned a GradSERU module. The small groups select and report out the two to three sets of survey questions with the results they find most important. When the larger group reconvenes, each student identifies the three issues on which they want the faculty to take action to improve graduate student experiences. Programs that have participated in the activity have found it helpful as it eliminates the guesswork of “whether they are highlighting the right things.” Moreover, “the students feel really empowered” by leading the prioritization process.

Items from GradSERU Module on “Sense of Belonging”

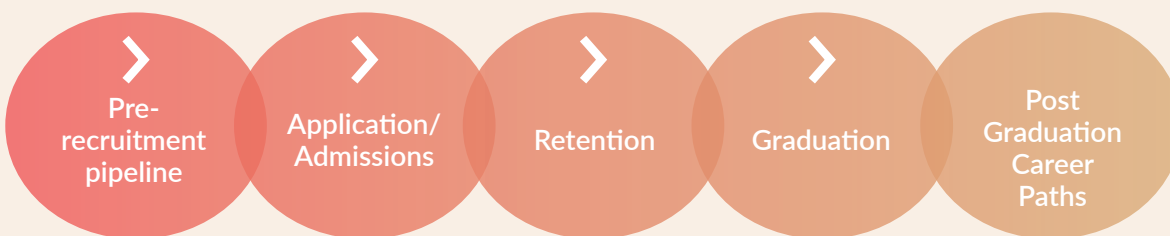
- There is a sense of solidarity among the students.
- I have friends in my graduate/professional program.
- I belong in my graduate program.
- I am proud to be a student in my graduate/professional program.
- Faculty members in my graduate/professional program are available to talk with me.
- Faculty members in my graduate/professional program give me positive reinforcement for my accomplishments.
- Faculty members in my graduate/professional program treat me fairly.

In addition to climate surveys, program faculty can also use inventories and self-assessments to better understand the impact of various practices. In our interviews with faculty and administrators, we heard that such efforts are most effective when faculty play a central role in the process. At one of the public R-1 institutions where we conducted an interview, the graduate school developed a tool that can be used by faculty to identify areas where improvements to equitable practice are needed and identify resources that can support improvements.

SPOTLIGHT: Tool to Assess Policies and Practices

Public R-1 Institution, Department of Dance

At this institution, the Graduate School developed a self-assessment tool that allows faculty to examine equitable access and opportunity gaps within their programs. Inspired by a tool originally designed for university staff, the self-assessment enables departments to rate their level of equitable practice for all students in different program areas: pre-recruitment, application and admissions, retention, graduation, and post-graduation. This assessment is paired with a suite of resources designed to support the chair and faculty to make improvements in areas highlighted by the assessment as “needing improvement.”



Seven programs, including Dance, piloted the tool in 2023. The exercise shed light on areas needing work, such as making the department’s graduate student handbook more visible on the department website and making information more transparent and accessible. The Office then supported the department in outlining immediate and long-term goals and created a timeline for the year. The Dance department chair credits this tool with providing an outline for intentional, faculty-led equity work. Questions outlined in the self-assessment can be revisited with changes in leadership, departmental priorities, and graduate student needs.

Moving from assessment to action can be difficult, but the examples above show that an open, participatory process can engage program participants in problem-solving from the very start. For a tool to support conversations about equity within academic programs, see Mitic et al.'s 2024 resource, *Starting Conversations about Culture in STEM*.

Practice 2: Communicate the institution's and program's commitments to welcoming and respectful environments for all students.

Interviews with faculty highlighted both internal and external opportunities for communicating the department or program's commitments to welcoming and respectful environments for all students. Such communication does not ensure that the community's members will all equally convey that commitment through their behavior, but in the same way we communicate the value of research integrity, we cannot expect communities to rise to shared values without making them clear.

One tool for such communication, the code of conduct, translates these values into specific behaviors. Research indicates that such codes can protect against abuses in academic and research environments (Fox et al., 2019). Below we highlight the process used by a department of Physics and Astronomy to set expectations for collegial behavior, which took place over one-and-a-half years and included three phases.



SPOTLIGHT: A Departmental Code of Conduct

Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of California, Irvine

The Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of California, Irvine took a thoughtful, community-oriented approach to developing a Code of Collegial Conduct for all members of the department.

Development Stage:

- A departmental Committee of Inclusive Excellence composed of faculty members, graduate students, undergraduates, a postdoc, and a staff member collaborated on a first draft.
- Two versions of the code were created: a more concise version, and one with more detailed descriptions of encouraged and unacceptable behaviors.
- The department consulted with campus General Counsel to approve the language on accountability (e.g. next steps if the Code is violated).
- After gathering input from selected faculty, the committee chose the more concise version.

Input Gathered from the Full Department:

- The department presented a draft of the Code of Conduct at a Town Hall attended by about 200 people (approximately 50% of all department members, including faculty, grad students, undergrad students, postdocs, staff members).
- Feedback from the Town Hall and through email outreach was integrated into the document.

Implementation:

- The department identified shared spaces for posting the Code of Conduct: seminar and conference rooms, shared student offices, classrooms, elevators, and hallways. The idea was to make the code visible throughout the department. The department provided funds to print the code on poster boards and smaller flyers.
- An email was sent to faculty requesting that they post the Code of Conduct in laboratory space. The department chair encouraged the faculty to start each academic year discussing the document with research team members.

In cases where the violations of the code of conduct have not fallen under Title IX, cases have been handled by the department. For example, in some cases, department leadership meets with the affected community members.

While department rules sometimes live only in handbooks and on websites, the UC Irvine example demonstrates that a code of conduct can be an important touchpoint for community building and expectation-setting. The code is “socialized” and made visible throughout the department. “The collaborative development and implementation of our code of conduct have fostered an enhanced sense of awareness and commitment to collegiality within our department,” observed a faculty member who led the effort. “This positive impact is evident across our classrooms, research labs, and meetings. Open discussions about these expectations have become the norm, leading to an increase in community members actively promoting and upholding these standards.”

Labs and research groups in departments without a code of conduct can find a useful resource for expectation-setting in the Healthy Research Teams and Labs Initiative. Developed by the University of Toronto and expanded by CGS and an advisory committee, the initiative provides a framework for faculty seeking to communicate and support healthy lab and research environments. In a “Pledge for Advisors” that can be signed and adopted at participating research groups, the first commitment is to explicitly state a commitment to equitable practices. An excerpt from the pledge is provided below, with examples of “promising practices” that support the communication of values.

Healthy Research Teams and Labs Initiative, University of Toronto and Council of Graduate Schools

“We recognize that clearly stating our commitment [to equitable practices] helps to ensure graduate students are given equitable attention and opportunities.” – excerpt from the Pledge for Advisors

Examples of promising practices excerpted from the Framework Document:

- Use group meeting time to discuss how your research team can engage in more equitable and welcoming working practices.
- Consider developing and maintaining a public statement of equitable practices in the research team setting, a research team values statement, or a social contract.
- When planning events, consider equity and accessibility.

Information about signing the pledge for advisors and mentors, along with resources to support research team leads, can be found [here](#). Notable in both approaches highlighted above is the emphasis on core values of respect and inclusion that represent the highest aspirations and values of the department or research group.

In addition to graduate programs and departments developing such communications, central university entities can communicate institutional commitments by sending clear messages about the importance of fair and inclusive communities where all talent can thrive. This is particularly important when the changing legal environment for higher education may lead faculty and students to wonder what new laws mean and how the university will implement any changes.



SPOTLIGHT: Communicating with Integrity in Times of Change and Uncertainty

Public R-1 Institution

Following the 2023 *SFFA* decision, many institutions developed coordinated efforts to communicate changes in the law and the implications for policy and practice, especially in the area of admissions. One Public R-1 institution developed a dedicated website with guidance on legal issues and offered a day-long workshop for faculty and staff focused on best practices in admissions. Additional actions included the development of both academic and personal application essay prompts, mandatory training for admissions committee members, and an increased emphasis on holistic admissions processes supported by rubrics. The institution also took steps to protect fellowship funding while adjusting eligibility criteria and renewed its commitment to recruitment and bridge programs designed to support a diverse applicant pool.

Since early 2025 and the issuing of Executive Orders concerning “DEI” and immigration policy, campus communication has become more challenging. “We’re in a situation where we’re weighing inconsistencies between established law and new Executive Orders that have yet to be litigated,” said the graduate dean. In this environment, the dean has stressed that it is essential to develop a regular communication system with faculty and students. This includes posting Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on the university website, sending emails from university leadership, including the graduate dean, and distributing a weekly newsletter with updates for the community. In some cases, university officials are not in a position to provide details about sensitive topics, such as the status of international students on campus. In these cases, the graduate dean said, “we need to balance a need to correct misinformation that may be circulating while also paying attention to legal and ethical reasons for protecting student privacy.”

In addition to technical compliance, university leadership has also emphasized the importance of reinforcing campus values through communication. For example, campus emails to students have reiterated support for graduate students’ contributions to research and teaching, particularly in environments where students may feel vulnerable due to shifting immigration or Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies. Communications now serve not only to clarify compliance but also to sustain trust and continuity in the institution’s academic mission. The graduate dean noted, “We must provide the best information we can, and stay in touch with our students and faculty. They need to know that we are following these issues closely and working to support their contributions to the community.”

Strong institutional messages about fairness, inclusion, and educational diversity benefits for all graduate students, faculty and staff are important anchors for program and department-level communications. These messages may be particularly important in times of ambiguity and in states with “DEI” legislation, which has contributed to the departure of many faculty members of color (Pedota, 2024). Such messages are also important for prospective students, who may look to the examples set by university and program leadership in deciding where to apply.

Practice 3: Encourage and support student community-building within and outside the program.

A lack of faculty diversity often compounds the challenges of isolation experienced by many minoritized students. Finding mentors and fellow graduate students who share meaningful features of one’s identity or experience is difficult in programs where those identities and experiences are not well-represented, or not represented at all, in faculty mentors and supervisors. Although working to address a lack of faculty diversity is the first and most direct way to address this problem, actions are needed in the interim to adequately serve current students—and attract new ones.

[Affinity] groups play quite a significant role in our recruitment efforts. The interactions in our open house [for admitted students] with affinity groups have really benefited our acceptance rate [from students whose identities are not already well-represented in the program].

– Faculty member, Physics

This issue has led some programs to create activities that bring together students with shared social identities and experiences from across campus and from other campuses. For example, trainees in the Sloan University Centers of Exemplary Mentoring (UCEM) program reported that one of the greatest benefits of UCEM is the peer mentorship and support available both within and across participating campuses, a design feature that helped to mitigate the isolation that students might otherwise have experienced in programs where they may have been the only student of color. This opportunity was provided in contexts where other students already had accessible, relatable mentoring opportunities at the institution and no student who wanted to access such opportunities was excluded.

We have many different retention programs that are really focused on making sure that once people are at [our university], they are feeling supported holistically. For one, we have the peer mentor program, which is an opportunity for [students] to have one-on-one with other graduate students who've been here for a little while to not only learn how to navigate their program but also navigate being at [the university].

– Faculty member, Psychiatry and Behavior Sciences

In our interviews with faculty, we heard frequently about the importance of providing organizational and financial support for networks substantively focused on experiences and needs of student identity-based groups and encouraging networks that transcend the academic experience. Research affirms the importance of such supports and indicates that coordination of activities by and for students should be considered a form of service as departments work overtime to improve climate and culture (Porter et al., 2018). This practice recognizes and validates the social and emotional aspects of the graduate student experience.

A Note on Race-Based Affinity Groups

Research has shown that opportunities to participate in race-based affinity groups hold out benefits to groups that have encountered racism and other systemic barriers in educational and professional spaces (Muraki et al., 2024; Pour-Khorshid, 2018). In a post-*SFFA* environment, race-themed student groups, housing and community spaces should be carefully considered. (See Keith & Coleman, 2024, pp. 20-21 for policy guidelines and examples that may affect programming for identity-based affinity groups.)

In general, such groups are legally sustainable “if open to all students based on neutral criteria, without considering a student’s racial status, but having an express aim to provide welcome, community, and programming related to particular races.” For example, one university we interviewed follows this general principle by clearly conveying that such groups and their events are open to all interested students.

Practice 4: Design inclusive learning opportunities to support the success of all students.

Many of the faculty and administrators we interviewed attested to the importance of inclusive pedagogies and curricular reform that removed unseen barriers to learning for students. While “inclusive pedagogies” have been defined in a variety of ways, a common thread running through different definitions is the importance of designing learning environments where all can learn and participate, as opposed to addressing the needs of individual learners through supplements to a “mainstream” curriculum or program (Florian, 2010; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). In this sense, inclusive pedagogies are conceptually aligned with the definition of equity in design that we provided at the beginning of this report.

In our interviews with faculty, many cited efforts to review and update curricula and program expectations to be clearer and more inclusive of all students in a broadly diverse student body. For example, one program noted that its curriculum had been entirely exam-based, creating a high-stakes, high-pressure situation that research has found to magnify racial/ethnic, gender, and social class inequalities—not to mention compromise anyone’s wellbeing. The program was reviewing a curriculum that many believed was outdated and not designed to help students succeed.

Several programs noted that they were working to make program and coursework goals more explicit to students, demonstrating Lovitts’s principle of “making the implicit explicit” in graduate training (Lovitts, 2007). This concept is a reminder that students from families with more formal education may intuitively navigate norms about graduate training, while first-generation students may struggle to understand unwritten rules. The two spotlights below offer examples of program efforts to make learning goals more explicit to students and provide appropriate supports to help them achieve and demonstrate this learning.

SPOTLIGHT: Developing Transparent Assessment Criteria for Program Milestones

Bioengineering PhD Program, Public R-1 Institution

The bioengineering program at this public R-1 institution identified the PhD qualifying exam as a hurdle to equitable opportunities for positive academic outcomes. According to a professor in the department, “Fifteen to 20 years ago, [the exam] used to be three professors in a room with a student and a whiteboard, just peppering that student with questions about their required coursework. There was little consistency from one student to next as to what the questions were, and it was a real source of anxiety for our students.” To address this problem, the committee developed a rubric for assessing student performance and developed a new course—“Communication Skills for Bioengineers”—that is designed to impart the skills and knowledge (e.g., scientific writing, literature citation, oral presentation) evaluated in the exam. Together these new resources mitigate against two barriers to equitable opportunity for success: different levels of preparation among doctoral students, and the bias and inconsistency introduced by ambiguous or absent evaluation criteria.

SPOTLIGHT: Engaging Master’s Students in Meeting Clear Learning Outcomes

Forestry Master’s Program, Public R-1 Institution

This university’s graduate program in Forestry has made significant efforts to diversify participation in their master’s and doctoral programs and provide all students with equitable opportunities to succeed academically. One goal of this effort is greater transparency for all students about program requirements and how these link to a student’s own goals. At the end of their first year of the program, students are required to reflect on their progress toward program-level learning outcomes and to identify the ways in which they will meet those goals; they reflect yearly on their progress. For example, a master’s student required to “communicate effectively in written and verbal formats” might choose to collaborate with The Nature Conservancy as an Outreach Intern or arrange to speak to a group of citizen scientists. The program’s flexibility about demonstrating learning outcomes has been particularly helpful for students pursuing non-traditional and multi-disciplinary graduate research. The process builds on campus-wide efforts to make learning outcomes more transparent and central to graduate student learning.

The concept of learning outcomes is vague and confusing for most students, especially for those less familiar with higher ed. Being very explicit about what the requirement is and having the students set the terms of meeting it, has helped reduce confusion and made it a point of empowerment around their degree. It also helps them highlight their skills learned in grad school to future employers.

– Graduate Administrator, Forestry Master’s Program

Beyond improving transparency of learning goals, programs can review and update pedagogical materials to ensure that they are representative of both the students in the program and the learning and professional situations they may encounter. At one private R-1 university, the Occupational Therapy Doctoral program conducted a thoughtful review of the program's values and desired competencies for occupational therapists serving a diverse clientele. This work served as an important foundation to expanding inclusive learning practices for all students across the program (see below).

SPOTLIGHT: Developing and Expanding Inclusive Practices

Occupational Therapy Doctoral Program, Private R-1 Institution

Several years ago, the Occupational Therapy program at this private R-1 institution was asked by students to make their curricula more inclusive. "Our students really pushed us to think about equity, to think about what we're doing in the classroom and how we're representing the clients that we serve in the clinic." The program became more intentional about reviewing the case studies and readings assigned to graduate students in the program, seeking to ensure that a broad range of graduate students as well as Occupational Therapy clients were represented in these materials. The program also took steps to make sure that clinical partners were using equitable practices to support the students conducting practice outside the university. These are designed to help students "feel safe and part of the community."

Working with the Equity in Graduate Education Consortium, the program also benefited from coaching and a review of materials such as the program website. The program realized that its website did not specifically call out the ways in which it sought to support individuals with disabilities—an oversight that took faculty by surprise given the discipline's focus on rehabilitation. The review offered the program an opportunity to broaden its commitment to educational diversity and inclusive learning opportunities for all students in its communications to prospective and current students and to the broader OT community.

Universal Design for Learning, another well-developed approach to inclusivity, is "a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn" (CAST, n.d.). Universal design principles include anticipating and removing barriers to access and success and designing flexible options that recognize differences in learning. While Universal Design is often associated with supporting individuals with disabilities (Fornauf & Erickson, 2020), the principles of universal design can be used to support accessibility and success for graduate students from a wide variety of backgrounds. The [*Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology*](#) Lab (DO-IT) at the University of Washington has developed a [*Universal Design toolkit*](#) for creating inclusive learning opportunities in higher education. DO-IT offers communities of practices focused on topics such as accessible cyberlearning, universal design in higher education, and supporting veterans with disabilities.

Practice 5: Review institutional and program policies for graduate students with an eye toward removing unintended barriers.

Although most graduate program policies were instated with a rationale, it is common for them not to be reviewed for continued relevance. They are most often handed down from one chair or director to the next, becoming as much a matter of tradition as of necessity. Admissions requirements and curriculum requirements are two examples of policies in graduate programs that have already been discussed in this document as open to re-evaluation to ensure equitable access, opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for all students. Others include first-year review, qualifying or comprehensive exam requirements, dissertation requirements (including the composition of committees), and timelines.

Similarly, college/school, university, and other institutional policies may benefit from review; these might include university-level policy on admissions, adequate academic progress, and dissertations. It is critical for universities to manage complaints and grievances using clear, transparent and fair policies. It may be helpful to work with tools sensitive to racial equity to support the review of such policies, such as those developed by the Center for Urban Education, or checklists of standards against which one's policy can be compared.

As noted above, environments where policies are hazy or hard to find can make it particularly difficult for students who are the first generation in their families to pursue graduate education to make informed decisions and find their way. Students need to understand the rules that apply to academic performance, leaves of absence, disciplinary actions, and the conditions of receiving benefits like tuition remission, health insurance, and stipends. With regard to academic performance, they need to understand faculty standards for high-quality work, when and how many publications they are expected to produce, and what their responsibilities are in a mentoring relationship, among other expectations.

Regardless of attention paid to clarity and transparency, it is also important to revise policies that have been constructed without considering undue barriers to many different groups of students, particularly first-generation students, who are more likely to serve as caregivers of siblings and other family members. A PhD student responsible for caring for a family member with a chronic health condition may, for example, be unduly affected by a policy that involves significant academic consequences for leaves of absence. A student who has encountered hardships on their academic pathway may be penalized by inflexible rules about past academic performance.

Our graduate school used to require applicants to supply a transcript from every single higher ed institution that they had ever attended. And it does actually seem like that's a pretty big burden for some people, especially [...] former military people or other people who've just been in education for a while. They take a couple of math classes at a community college. It just adds up to a lot. So [the graduate school] relaxed that last year, and now only the transcript from the institution where their degree was awarded is required, and then anything else is optional to maybe prove skill in an area.

– Administrator, public R-1 institution

One institution we interviewed pointed to the importance of developing a policy that allows graduate students to take personal leave for one semester without needing to apply before returning to their programs. This policy, which was developed by the Faculty Senate, allows students time and space to deal with a personal challenge. This may be particularly important for first-generation students who are location-bound—tied by family responsibilities or financial limitations to the location of the university.

Below we provide a spotlight from a public R-1 that has taken a thoughtful approach to making policies more equitable for a broad range of students, enhancing the ability all students to thrive in its graduate programs.

SPOTLIGHT: Developing Policies that Eliminate Barriers to Success for a Broad Range of Students, Public R-1 Institution

This public R-1 institution has recognized that policies for graduate students may have differential impacts on sub-groups of students. As a result, the university has worked to remove barriers and establish transparent policies that provide fair opportunities for all students to thrive. In particular, the Graduate Faculty Senate established a sick leave policy that provides up to 10 days in succession for illness or illness-related care. The policy allows any graduate student who is ill or is a caretaker for someone who is ill to continue to receive financial support during that time, unless a funding agency disallows such support. With a relatively short-term leave, students are also able to continue coursework with the support of faculty.

The Graduate Faculty Senate also established a policy that provides assistance, accommodations, or leave for pregnancy, pregnancy-related conditions, and parenting students. Students who wish to remain in their coursework can request academic modifications for up to six weeks or may opt to take a leave from their academic and assistantship responsibilities for a longer period of time. Students are also allowed extensions to prepare for qualifying or comprehensive exams, or time-to-degree for doctoral candidacy. The policy was crafted to include students who are adopting, fostering, or offering kinship replacement, or serving as grandparents or stepparents, among other parenting relationships. The policy reflects that students come to graduate school at different life stages and circumstances. As such, it was developed to be inclusive of various ages, life experiences, and parenting relationships.

Programs should also consider how they communicate a policy to students. The existence of a policy on a website or a handbook does not necessarily mean that it is seen and understood. As one graduate administrator told us, it's important for faculty to talk about policies and expectations with students: "In one of our programs, where most of the students are first-gen, we have a faculty member who talks through what it's like to be in a program. In particular, she spends time in the program orientation talking through differences in undergraduate and graduate expectations." This practice demonstrates a form of equity-mindedness: an awareness that students who are the first in their families to participate in higher education are more likely to succeed if faculty take the time to explain the program environment and the expectations that go along with it. All students benefit from clarity, even if only to confirm assumptions that are correct. But students who are unaware of expectations based on their life experiences are unduly disadvantaged without clarity.

Practice 6: Prioritize student wellbeing, with attention to different types of student experiences.

The environment cultivated by a graduate program provides a foundation for the wellbeing and mental health of its graduate students. In addition to the pressure of adapting to disciplinary norms and values, interpersonal interactions, especially with faculty advisors, may impact student wellbeing in both positive and negative ways. Building a culture of shared responsibility for wellbeing across a graduate program—and indeed, across the university—is key to supporting all students (Posselt, 2021).

It is also critical to recognize that different student groups experience different stressors and uneven access to support. In focus groups conducted as part of a 2021 study by CGS and the Jed Foundation, students from different identity groups—students of color, veterans, Indigenous students, and others—reported stresses that required recognition and validation of their student identities outside of the academic experience. In a similar vein, the Sloan Foundation’s evaluation of the University Centers of Exemplary Mentoring found that Black, Indigenous and Latine students needed supports that took into consideration different aspects of their experiences as graduate students: individual (which included support for identity and holistic wellbeing); programs and networks (including academic and professional structures); and systems and cultures (focusing on the institutional environment) (Gale & McGuire, 2023, p. 39). In particular, students participating in the UCEM program reported a desire to be recognized as “whole persons” and to have their lived experiences, which may differ from those of majority students, seen and acknowledged.

A graduate program that provides equitable opportunities and experiences for all students will make space for all students to be recognized as whole persons while also recognizing that individual student experiences are different. Based on campus focus groups, a convening, and a survey of graduate institutions, the CGS/JED report on graduate student mental health and wellbeing recommends that university leadership “creat[e] campus spaces to acknowledge and discuss challenges and crises experienced directly by minoritized graduate students” and urges graduate institutions to ensure that mental health and wellbeing programs on campus take into consideration the needs of different groups of students.⁶ Recognizing that student experiences are different—and that students lean on different strengths for their success—helps promote success for all students and does not represent preferences on the basis of race or ethnicity.

⁶ Examples of programs designed to support the needs of different communities of graduate students (student veterans, international students, first-generation students) can be found in the CGS-Jed report. See CGS & Jed, 2021, pp. 27-29.

PART III

Supporting Good Mentoring for All

In the context of graduate education, the terms “mentor” and “advisor” are often used loosely and left undistinguished. The literature on these terms identifies advising as a formal role with responsibility for academic support of the student (Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006) whereas mentoring typically covers a range of career, professional development, and social/emotional supports. For example, the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine’s Committee on the Science of Effective Mentoring in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEMM) adopted the following working definition of mentoring: “a professional, working alliance in which individuals work together over time to support the personal and professional growth, development, and success of the relational partners through the provision of career and psychosocial support” (NASEM, 2019, p. 2). As noted by NASEM, mentoring does not necessarily involve a dyad between student and advisor but may involve multiple networks and relationships.

In graduate school, the quality of mentoring—whether this role is filled by the advisor or not— is often the most critical factor in whether a student persists, thrives, and completes the graduate degree (Lovitts, 2001; Griffin et al., 2020). Many programs struggle with the decision to expand advising expectations or to augment the advising relationships with mentorship programs that are designed to fill gaps in the advisor/advisee relationship. While every person’s experience is different, statistically, women, students of color, students with disabilities and other minoritized groups are more likely to experience bias, a lack of support for challenges that their advisors did not personally face on their academic and career journeys.

As a growing number of studies have shown, mentoring is more likely to be equitable and successful when supported by broader program-level and institutional efforts to support systemic change in graduate education (Gale et al., 2023; Griffin, 2020; NASEM, 2024). For example, the recent evaluation of the Sloan University Centers of Exemplary Mentoring found that despite focused interventions, mentoring experiences for Black, Indigenous, and/or Latine students were inconsistent and not always sufficient to mitigate against larger barriers within programs and institutions. To address these gaps, the evaluation identified ways to provide a community of support to undergird the primary mentoring relationship: facilitating access to mentors across multiple spheres; supporting mentors and scholars in developing healthy mentor/mentee relationships; and building community among faculty members. This approach benefited all students and harmed none.

In the current project, discussions with program faculty and administrators corroborated the need for stronger community supports for mentoring. A recurring theme was the importance of placing mentoring in the larger context of systemic barrier-removal efforts. For example, one interview participant told us that the new NSF requirements for graduate student mentoring have provided helpful external incentives for improving not just mentoring, but improvements to equitable practices in graduate education. In her words, the requirement that faculty have mentoring plans in place for graduate students supported on NSF grants is “an important catalyst that is helping advance efforts to influence positive systemic change.” Yet another participant observed that major progress in mentoring practices finally took off in the context of efforts to improve PhD education more broadly.

These views stand in contrast to one where mentoring is viewed in isolation from other aspects of the graduate student experience. Funders and organizations that promote graduate education have increasingly recognized a need for this more holistic, contextualized view of mentoring. For example, a recent National Academies project explored the nexus between mentorship, well-being, and professional development in STEM due to the mutually reinforcing impact of these areas of practice (NASEM, 2024). Effective mentoring, with attention to the needs of a wide range of students, is critical for providing equitable opportunities and outcomes for all graduate students.

The three practices highlighted in this section stress systemic actions to support mentoring, whether at the institutional or program level.

Practice 1: Develop shared expectations and processes for inclusive mentoring.

There is strong evidence that programs with clear and consistently applied guidelines for mentors and mentees are more likely to support equitable outcomes for all students (Wofford et al., n.d.). The National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report, *The Science of Effective Mentorship in STEMM* underscores the role of program leaders in developing expectations by “ensuring there are evidence-based guidelines, tools, and processes for mentors and mentees to set clear expectations, engage in regular assessments, and participate in mentorship education” (NASEM, 2024.) The programs we interviewed used a variety of approaches to provide resources and guidance. Below we highlight two robust resources, both of which seek to raise expectations and awareness across graduate programs on campus.



SPOTLIGHT: Practical Toolkit for Mentoring in Graduate Education

All graduate and postdoctoral programs, Cornell University

A collaborative initiative based at Cornell University, the Faculty Advancing Inclusive Mentoring Resource Center (FAIM) is “an equity-based systemic change initiative that provides a framework for inclusive mentorship applicable across graduate education and the professoriate.” The initiative has developed a Practical Toolkit for Mentoring that is designed to support transparent and collaborative communication between mentors and mentees and is freely available online. The resource includes a variety of resources that programs can promote to faculty, among them, a Mentor-Mentee Mentorship Expectations Scales Worksheet, a task that helps the mentor and mentee communicate and bring into greater alignment their mentoring expectations; a Mentoring Expectations Agreement Plan; a Mentor Network Map; and guidance and examples for Individual Development Plans in all broad fields of study. FAIM defines its purpose as supporting intellectual risk-taking for all students. As one campus administrator put it, “It’s especially beneficial for subpopulations that are historically underrepresented, but these are tools that benefit the mentoring experiences potentially of all students of all backgrounds.”

The FAIM framework also “provides key principles of inclusive mentorship that PIs can adapt and adopt to meet their contextual needs.” Examples include:

- Collaboratively defining and communicating mutual expectations.
- Using a growth mindset orientation and centering on the mentor and mentee’s abilities to learn and develop.
- Addressing relational power dynamics.

Resources in the FAIM toolkit provide tools for faculty and students seeking to communicate and collaborate in these areas. Links to other institutional toolkits can be found under “Curated Resources.”

SPOTLIGHT: Testing Culturally Relevant Mentoring Compacts

Five-Department Collaboration at Public R-1 Institution

At this public, R-1 institution, five departments—Bioengineering, Economics, History, Physics, and Oceanography—have been selected to participate in a project to test culturally relevant mentoring compacts. In culturally relevant mentoring or culturally aware mentoring, “mentors recognize their own culturally shaped beliefs, perceptions, and judgments and are cognizant of cultural differences and similarities between themselves and their mentees” (CIMER, n.d.). Departments participating in the program develop project goals and workplans, a department-specific Mentorship Compact, activities to highlight culturally relevant mentoring practices, and a program evaluation. Each department team working to develop the compacts includes a graduate student, a postdoctoral scholar, a staff member, a faculty member, and the department chair.

Practice 2: Develop processes for holding community members accountable for fair and high-quality mentoring practices.

The initiatives described above provide excellent tools for supporting faculty with strong motivation to become equity-minded mentors. The development and use of such resources needs to be balanced with clear expectations of graduate faculty, as well as standards for behavior, when evidence of harmful or unfair mentoring practices emerge. As noted in Griffin 2020 and Johnson & Griffin (2025), formalizing expectations of mentors, incentivizing participation in mentoring work, and improving assessment, reporting and accountability are strategies with high potential to address inequities and promote better outcomes for all students. The University of Michigan has a long history of providing resources and support to mentors, and recently, formalized expectations through projects described in the spotlight below.

SPOTLIGHT: Clear Expectations and Professional Standards for Graduate Student Mentors

Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan

The Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan has developed two primary means for setting expectations and professional standards for mentoring of graduate students.

- **Development of a University-Wide Mentoring Plan Expectation for Graduate Students.** As of 2021, Rackham established an expectation that all programs develop a means by which faculty and doctoral students in their programs write mentoring plans (details are provided [here](#) and [here](#)). How this was accomplished was left to each program. Evaluation of the implementation of the mentoring plan process will take place during a program review that occurs every five years. As part of the review, the graduate school survey students about whether they have a mentoring plan and how useful it is.
- **Creation of Professional Standards for Graduate Faculty.** In 2023, the Rackham Executive Board approved a Statement of Values, Privileges, and Responsibilities of the Rackham Graduate Faculty. The statement represents professional standards for graduate faculty, and there is a policy and procedure to address allegations of failure to uphold the standards which includes the possibility of a preliminary inquiry, investigation, and sanctions. Among these standards is to “ensure inclusive, equitable, and consistent treatment of students” and “maintain respect toward students as individuals.” An overview of the statement and allegation procedure can be found [here](#).

The university also provides a wide variety of resources for both faculty and students to support the quality of graduate student mentoring.

Just as some programs are using climate surveys to understand how different groups of students experience the climate of their program or university (see section II, practice 1), universities can use surveys and other methods of collecting information to understand experiences of mentoring. Such an approach is used in one private R-1's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. Through student surveys, the program has recognized that many minoritized students and women experience microaggressions in their program and has developed measures to uncover and mitigate this problem, including providing feedback to mentors.

SPOTLIGHT: Targeting Microaggressions Through Training and Data Collection

Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, Private R-1 Institution

The Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at this private R-1 institution has made a concerted effort to combat microaggressions. The department offered faculty training including material on how to elicit and respond to feedback received around microaggressions. At both the departmental and course level, feedback is regularly solicited from students. An anonymous student survey including questions concerning equity and inclusion and microaggressions is administered annually. Results from the survey are used to monitor and develop performance improvement plans for faculty. Additionally, questions related to discriminatory behavior and microaggressions are embedded in every course evaluation. The data from the evaluations allow the department to provide feedback to graduate mentors and develop division-wide or departmental programs to address trends.

Practice 3: Send the message that student success goes beyond academic advising and relies on a broad community of support.

The apprenticeship model of mentoring dates to ancient Greece. Today's typical version of this model assumes that a graduate student's advisor or research supervisor will serve as the primary or sole mentor during the graduate student's career. As noted above, this approach has limitations, especially for minoritized students. First, as noted above, supervisors may not share salient identity features and lived experiences with their advisees, making it more difficult to relate to one another's needs. Second, the academic advisor may be well-positioned to provide academic support for a student but simply will not have the time or resources to provide all of the types of support that graduate students need to survive and thrive in their programs. Third, as noted by NASEM (2018), the single advisor model invests too much power in one person and lends itself to abuse of power. The report recommends that universities "consider power-diffusion mechanisms (i.e., mentoring networks or committee-based advising and departmental funding rather than funding only from a principal investigator) to reduce the risk of sexual harassment" (NASEM, 2018, p. 7).

For these reasons, faculty and graduate program chairs should send a clear message that everyone, including faculty, need a community of support in academia. This message acknowledges that no single faculty member can provide all the support that a student needs and encourages faculty to support the student in seeking a network of individuals who can support their success. Students, for their part, may appreciate being granted "permission" to develop relationships. Indeed, seeking relationship with a variety of mentors, including peer mentors, is likely to serve them well in their careers. Below we highlight two approaches that are designed to expand student support beyond the single-mentor model.

SPOTLIGHT: Developing Programs that Match Students with Mentors outside their Department, The University at Buffalo

The University at Buffalo hosts the Network for Enriched Academic Relationships (NEAR), a mentoring network designed to connect graduate students and postdoctoral scholars with mentors outside their program of study. The program connects students with faculty and staff with doctoral degrees who have experience navigating similar obstacles (e.g., systemic bias, personal hardship) or who can be effective allies.

NEAR provides a platform for situational mentoring and is student/postdoc driven, encouraging students and scholars to select mentors that best suit their needs at a time when they need them rather than automatically pairing them with a mentor. Students review the NEAR website to find a mentor, and they contact the mentor to connect and discuss a situation or issue. These connections can often lead to a long-term mentoring relationship.

NEAR stands out for its inclusivity, with mentors encompassing a wide range of personal identities and experiences, and topics they are willing to discuss. To date, NEAR includes faculty and staff from all disciplines and decanal units.

To enhance the effectiveness of NEAR, the Graduate School conducts workshops and training sessions for mentors, including the “Entering Mentoring” workshop series by the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER). NEAR’s success is monitored through annual surveys focusing on awareness and engagement levels among students. Results indicate a positive trend in both areas, with a notable increase in interactions between students and mentors. All students have access to this program. However, the high visitation rate on the NEAR website of mentors with minoritized identities signals a growing awareness and utilization of the network among minoritized graduate students and postdoctoral scholars.

Over the past two years, the NEAR program has increased from 60 to 80 mentors. Efforts are underway to further expand the NEAR mentor network, aiming to reach 100+ mentors. The Graduate School promotes NEAR through various channels, including door signs for mentors, orientations and presentations, informational postcards, newsletters, and direct email communications sent throughout the semester.

To support student agency in seeking a broad range of mentors, programs can develop or share “mentor maps”— tools that graduate students and postdocs can use to identify their mentoring needs and develop a plan for seeking appropriate types of support. Cornell’s FAIM program has adapted a mentor network map originally developed by the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (NCFDD). The map allows students to identify sources of support across the academic, wellbeing, and professional domains. This helps students identify supports they may already have while also helping them identify areas where more support is needed.

As universities and programs help graduate students expanding their mentoring networks, it is important to remember that graduate students often serve as mentors for one another. The public R-2 institution described below has made peer-to-peer mentoring a cornerstone of its work.

SPOTLIGHT: Improving Graduate Student Well-Being through Improved Mentoring

Public R-2 University

Insufficient mentoring and concern for student wellbeing have been linked to student attrition from graduate programs. One public R-2 institution addressed these related concerns by developing a program designed to help graduate students learn effective practices for mentoring undergraduates and supporting student wellbeing. Interventions were developed at multiple levels: graduate students were provided with mentoring workshops that helped them develop skills as future mentors, but they also received one-on-one mentoring from faculty. These activities were supported by peer groups that helped students “socialize” learning from the workshops and build connections with peers.

The program is unlike many that have focused solely on improving faculty mentoring practices. Such programs may not succeed in breaking the isolation felt by students when mentoring relationships are not supportive. Instead, students learn about mentoring “in community”—with each other, with mentoring experts, and with faculty mentors.

For additional resources and support for equitable mentoring, faculty can consult the [Equity-Minded Mentoring Toolkit](#), which provides modules and exercises on navigating expectations, conducting “equity checks” in mentoring relationships, and other resources.



PART IV

Supporting Mission-Based Equity Goals in States with “DEI” Legislation and in the New Federal Policy Environment

Since 2020, higher education institutions have faced legislative and policy efforts at the state level to restrict diversity, equity, and inclusion activities designed to create more inclusive and supportive educational and work environments for all students, faculty and staff. As of this publication, about 132 “DEI” legislation or policies have been introduced in 29 states and 19 have become law, with more state bills expected in 2025 ([Chronicle](#), 2025).

While the language in state bills and state-based policies varies by state, most ban the funding of offices and officers with responsibilities for this work, mandatory diversity trainings and the use of diversity statements, and preferences on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin. Overall, the language in the state bills and policies is vague and often confusing, creating a broad chilling effect on university activities. For this reason, it is important to work with your university counsel’s office to analyze the actual scope of coverage—and exclusions—in these laws to avoid over-reading their prohibitions. Thus far, lower federal courts have found that some “DEI” state legislation violates or likely violates the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution by imposing viewpoint restrictions on educators or students. In one case (*Pernell v. Lamb*), a district court has temporarily blocked Florida’s “anti-woke” law from being applied in the education context, and in another case (*Honeyfund.com v. DeSantis*), the district court has permanently blocked the “anti-woke” law from being applied in the private employment training context.⁷

Higher education institutions are also facing multiple executive orders issued by the Trump Administration and a U.S. Department of Education “Dear Colleague” Letter and FAQs targeting diversity, equity and inclusion policies and programming. The lawfulness and constitutionality of these efforts have been challenged in multiple cases, with preliminary injunction requests pending based on due process and constitutional rights under the First Amendment.⁸

The vagueness in many of the state bills, in combination with efforts in the “Dear Colleague” Letter to overstate the limitations set forth in the ruling in *SFFA*—which does not outlaw equity, diversity or inclusion as the subject of program content or the responsibility of offices or jobs—can contribute to an environment in which administrators and faculty members feel pressure to move away from equity-minded practices that remain lawful (Garces, Pedota, & Epstein, 2025). In fact, research studies have documented how faculty members are feeling

7 In *Pernell v. Lamb*, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the lower court decision to temporarily block the law in the education context because the law likely violates the First Amendment. As of this report’s publication, a final decision in that case is pending. In another case, *Honeyfund.com v. DeSantis*, a district court issued a final judgment to indefinitely block the same Florida law from being applied in the employment training context. That ruling was not appealed and thus the law cannot be applied to such trainings because it violates the First Amendment by imposing viewpoint restrictions on workplace trainings and discussion.

8 The preliminary injunction granted by the U.S. district court in *National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education v. Trump* is temporarily suspended and pending before the U.S. court of appeals as of April 1, 2025. Three other cases challenging the lawfulness and constitutionality of the U.S. Department of Education’s Dear Colleague Letter and subsequent Frequently Asked Questions document are pending in federal courts (*American Federation of Teachers v. U.S. Department of Education*, *National Education Association v. U.S. Department of Education*, and *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) v. U.S. Department of Education*).

pressured to alter their teaching methods, cancel courses, or leave their institutions altogether (Pedota, 2023; Pedota et al., 2025). Policy organizations and media outlets have similarly reported on a range of responses to “DEI” legislation and policies that represent overreach.

In this climate, graduate deans and other administrators, such as college deans and department chairs, can highlight legally permissible actions that promote intellectual inquiry, advance institutional missions, and promote access and success for all students. In this report, we have outlined practices that should be viewed as consistent with a post-*SFFA* legal context, and where relevant, highlighted connections to state contexts. In this section, we highlight specific messages and actions grounded in research that may help mitigate the confusion that faculty members and graduate students face in the current policy and political context (Pedota et al., 2025).

Supporting Academic Freedom and Its Responsibilities

Recent research on faculty members’ responses to proposed state legislation and policies illustrates that such legislation and policies may limit the scope of scholarly inquiry and dialogue. In these contexts, affirming the rights and responsibilities of all faculty members and graduate students under academic freedom—and for public institutions, First Amendment protections—can be particularly helpful for informing the graduate community about teaching and research-related activities that remain lawful and, importantly, promote mission-based goals.

Academic freedom is the professional and law-based principle that includes academic integrity and responsibility and supports the pursuit of knowledge without fear of reprisal or external political influence. This principle is recognized as an important aspect of First Amendment Rights and is also embedded in accreditation standards that specifically safeguard institutions and individuals from external political interference. In graduate education, academic freedom is vital for fueling innovation and progress, for preserving the integrity of research, and for fostering an educational environment that produces graduates who can contribute meaningfully to society. As the backbone of a scholarly community, academic freedom enables faculty members and graduate students to produce evidence-based scholarship that serves the public by deepening understandings of social, political, and economic issues.

Academic freedom in graduate education is vital to protect:

- **Innovation and Progress:** It allows scholars to pursue bold, unconventional ideas without fear of censorship or reprisal, driving innovation and progress in their fields.
- **Integrity of Research:** It ensures that faculty members and graduate students can conduct research without external influence, thus preserving the integrity and credibility of academic work.
- **Open Dialogue and Critical Thinking:** It creates an environment for students and faculty to engage in open, evidence-based inquiry, discussion, and critique, which is essential for developing critical thinking skills.
- **Educational Excellence:** By upholding the rights and responsibilities of academic freedom, graduate programs maintain high standards of teaching and scholarship and produce graduates who are well-prepared to contribute meaningfully to society and the workforce.

Academic freedom allows faculty members and graduate students the autonomy to engage in evidence-based discussions of relevant topics in the classroom, select pedagogical methods that promote critical thinking, and speak publicly on matters within their expertise. For all these reasons, academic freedom is fundamental for maintaining educational excellence.

Graduate administrators, deans and department chairs can actively affirm and communicate these protections to faculty members and graduate students during regular meetings and individual discussions, underscoring how these freedoms ultimately work to advance the values and missions of their respective programs and departments. For example, graduate administrators can hold informal sessions that are open to the graduate community to provide a space to address pressing concerns and reaffirm the importance of academic expertise and the protections under academic freedom that are essential to fulfilling institutional mission and programmatic goals. Proactive messages are particularly beneficial for graduate students and faculty members engaged in equity-related teaching and research, helping them feel supported to continue activities that are protected by the law.

Leveraging Networks of Relationships with Organizations

In a confusing legal landscape, graduate deans and other graduate administrators can leverage relationships with organizations developing responses and approaches to evolving state policy contexts (Garces, Pedota, & Epstein, 2025).

Recent research on faculty members' responses to proposed "DEI" state legislation indicates that clear, actionable, and consistent messaging from external organizations bolstered faculty members' confidence in continuing with equity-focused research and teaching (Pedota et al., 2025). Organizations like PEN America, AAUP, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the ACLU, for example, are adept at swiftly analyzing proposed or enacted state legislation and offering clear, research-informed strategies. Graduate administrators can encourage graduate faculty members and students to seek guidance from these organizations. They can also establish regular opportunities for collaboration, for example, by hosting webinars or inviting representatives to faculty meetings to share ongoing updates and strategies for maintaining equity-focused policies and practices. Creating these collaborative spaces is vital to supporting graduate faculty members and students as they pursue protected scholarship and teaching activities.

Graduate leaders themselves, of course, can draw from reports and other materials developed by these organizations, such as [ACE's and PEN America's report](#) on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, to inform communication and decision-making. For graduate leaders, engaging with local groups and peers from similar institutions creates vital spaces for sharing concerns and navigating uncertainty, confusion, and fear.

Summary of Promising Practices for Supporting Faculty and Graduate Students:

- 1. Reaffirm and communicate academic freedom protections and associated academic responsibility:** Regularly affirm the graduate school's commitment to academic freedom and responsibility in evidence-based research, teaching, and extramural speech to create a secure environment for faculty members and graduate students to pursue equity-focused work.
- 2. Foster regular open and supportive dialogue with the graduate community:** Establish consistent, informal spaces where faculty members and graduate students can express concerns, and administrators can clarify how academic freedom and responsibility apply to protected equity-focused activities, the institutional mission, and program goals.

3. **Share clear, research-informed resources with graduate faculty and students:** Equip graduate faculty members and students with resources from trusted organizations, such as reports and webinars, to deepen their understanding of academic freedom and the legal constraints specific to their states.
4. **Leverage expertise from policy, advocacy, and civil rights organizations:** Partner with policy, advocacy, and organizations at the local and national level to provide guidance on protected scholarship and teaching practices.
5. **Encourage proactive network building:** Assist graduate faculty and students in building relationships with external legal and policy experts to protect their rights and responsibilities under academic freedom to pursue their scholarship and teaching activities.



CONCLUSION

Expanding the Evidence Base on Equitable Practices in Graduate Education

In the world of research and scholarship, jokes are often made about publications that end with the conclusion that “more research is needed.” The authors of this report unequivocally support more research on equity in graduate education, with the caveat that readers should not wait for more evidence before they begin to experiment with, test, and refine equity-minded practices for all students, faculty and staff on their campuses and in their programs.

There are many reasons why it is important to continue implementing and assessing what we do in graduate education—not only those reasons that seek to promote equity. First and foremost, researchers and scholars, along with the campuses where they work, should create a foundation for understanding the impact of their policies and practices. Without evidence, our work may turn out to be harmful, ineffective, misaligned with institutional or program missions, or simply not as strong as it could be.

But there are additional reasons for testing equity-related interventions that are relevant to current U.S. legal contexts. Recent legal challenges to higher education admissions practices and other benefits have been grounded in many untested assumptions about the objectivity of quantitative measures of student merit, such as GPA and test scores. To effectively test these assumptions and provide additional data about other metrics of student preparation, universities will need to collect and communicate data demonstrating the impact of their practices on the goals of programs, institutions, and individual students.

Research to support systemic barrier removal and changes in norms in graduate education merits closer attention by researchers, faculty, staff and graduate administrators. How do more equitable practices affect different groups in a graduate community? What is the impact of these practices on time-to-degree, student and faculty scholarship and research, and alumni career pathways and success? Universities and their faculty are well-positioned to ask and answer these questions. An open mind, a clear-sighted view of our missions, and a commitment to grounding our policies and practice in evidence, will help us make graduate education more equitable—and better—for all.



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Notes

