

# A Diverse Student Body

---

No two diversity plans are alike, even when expressing the importance of having students from diverse backgrounds.

A top-tier school that attracts outstanding students uses this eloquent language: “Achieving a well-rounded and representative student body is not just the right thing to do as a matter of social progress, it also is the best thing to do in shaping a solid academic program. Students learn from other students. Not only do the best students challenge each other intellectually, but there is tremendous growth opportunity in interacting with people from varied backgrounds.”

In contrast, an urban university that admits 2.0 GPA applicants states matter-of-factly: “At our university, many students are marginal in terms of the ACT or SAT and have GPAs that would be unacceptable at most top-tier universities. We do not skim off the cream of the educational crop each year. But that does not mean we have low standards. It means we have accepted the responsibility as educators to provide even socially and culturally disadvantaged students an opportunity to learn and grow.... We do not guarantee students will succeed, but we do guarantee that we will do everything we can to help those who are willing to work hard.”

Notice how both quotes capture an importance in having a diverse student body. But one speaks about social progress and the importance of racial interaction, while the other reveals a passion to make a difference in the lives of minority students.

Diversity means different things in different parts of the country. The South has a larger African American population. In the Southwest, Hispanics. On the West Coast, Asian Americans. And the Plains states have a larger Native American population.

JMC programs are expected to attract a student body that approximates the percentage of minorities both in the university’s student body and in the university’s service area. Determining “service area” is an important decision, since minority numbers in the service area will be a key benchmark for diversity success.

In our review of diversity plans, one university defined its service area as the entire nation. Based on a 2008 report from the Census Bureau, 34 percent of the nation’s people now list themselves as belonging to a minority population group – 11 percent higher than in 2000. Hispanics now account for 15 percent of the U.S. population, African Americans 13.5 percent, and Asians 5 percent.

On the other extreme of defining service area, a California school listed only its local county because about 60 percent of its student body comes from this one county.

No hard-and-fast rules exist in designating a unit’s service area. State universities typically list the state itself as the service area, even though a quarter or more of the student body may come from out of state. Regional universities usually define the service area as their particular section of a state. One private university lists its service area as nine states that cumulatively account for 80 percent of the student body, even though students come from 46 states in all.

**Student diversity  
should approximate  
university percentages  
and the 'service area'**

It's common for a JMC program to have a minority student population that lags the numbers in the university and service area. In their diversity plans and self-studies, JMC programs often explain why. Here is a sample of explanations reflecting a variety of diverse populations:

*Hispanic:* A California school noted that its service area has a 25 percent Hispanic population, but only 12 percent of Hispanic high school graduates have the necessary academic coursework and requirements to enter the California State University system.

*African American:* An accreditation team fussed at a school whose percentage of black students is half the percentage of the defined service area. In defense, the unit noted that the university has high tuition and a modest endowment for scholarship offers, and this combination has a particular impact on minority enrollment.

*Asian American:* A school lagging behind the university average for Asian American students gives this reason: "This is a group with a more recent history of immigration, and many still use English as their second language." As a result, the school said a disproportionate share of Asians at this university go into mathematics, engineering and the sciences.

*Native American:* In a Far West state, a JMC diversity plan read: "The School of Journalism recognizes the need – and welcomes every opportunity – to recruit more students from the African American, Hispanic and Asian ethnic groups. However, the School of Journalism is required to first meet its legal obligation to raise the number of our American Indian students to the 6 percent enrollment level, and thus must continue to concentrate special recruiting efforts on that ethnic group."

*International:* Many programs define student diversity to include both U.S. minority and international students. In fact, to build diversity, an HBCU program considers international student exchange programs as a good diversifier in a global age and makes recruiting visits to schools with large numbers of white, Hispanic and international students.

The 'service area' represents where the university draws most of its students

**Good idea... Take care in designating a proper service area that reflects the geographic home of a majority of students.** There's no necessity to expand the service area to take into account pockets of students from other locales. ACEJMC looks for the fat part of the enrollment curve.

In writing a diversity plan, programs need to be cautious of several not-so-good ideas regarding student diversity. Here are three:

**Not a good idea... Fill the diversity plan with passive statements merely pledging cooperation and continuation.** One school states its diversity goals as "Cooperate with the Admissions Office" and "Explore a minority mentoring program" and "Continue to include women and minorities in School publications." These come across as throwaway goals, something easily put on paper and not measurable.

**Not a good idea... Promise ambitious minority increases when student enrollment is not really within your control.** A Western program learned this the hard way and concluded, "Despite strong student recruitment efforts, [the unit] was unable to come close to meeting goals of increasing minority enrollment by 2 percent per year. However, it did keep pace with minority enrollment within the university overall. That in part appears to underscore the budgetary dependence of the department upon university student recruiting activities."

## Worst Victory Claim:

'especially gratifying' to have a 56% female student body

### **Not a good idea... Use discriminatory language in the zeal to promote diversity.**

A program in the Southwest promises to provide “female and minority students” with appropriate internship, fellowship, scholarship and good career experiences. What, no help for the white male student to secure internships and scholarships?

JMC programs have no problem attracting female students. In fact, it’s common to have 60 percent or higher female enrollment in journalism and communications programs. It’s the male student who is becoming endangered.

So this has to win the award for "Worst Victory Claim" in a self-study: A department pat itself on the back for having a 56 percent female student body, saying the statistic is “especially gratifying” considering that the university’s service area (the general population) is 51 percent female. Amazing.

## RECRUITMENT IDEAS

In its diversity plan, a JMC department announced ambitious plans to increase the percentage of minority students by 1 percent a year for the next decade, doubling its current 10 percent. In time, whoever wrote that will discover that the outcome likely will hinge on university recruitment efforts more than anything the department does.

But a department certainly can influence that outcome through proactive initiatives. That’s what an accreditation team likes to see.

For example, an ACEJMC team praised the efforts of a program in a Native American region of the country. The team wrote that the department “aggressively recruits Native students, visiting reservation schools, getting Native students to attend the department-sponsored Summer Institute, and giving Native students in the department vital, sometimes highly idiosyncratic, material and emotional assistance to complete the program. For example, the head and one faculty member found a dentist to give free services to a Native broadcasting student who needed to improve her appearance for an internship that involved going on-air.”

On the other hand, sometimes the promises in a diversity plan get sort of silly. One school says it will start identifying minority students in elementary schools who might be interested in pursuing a journalism degree in college. The promise came with no action plan or specifics.

Making personal contact with high schools is the No. 1 student recruitment idea in diversity plans.

### **Good idea... Send departmental faculty or staff to area high schools with high minority populations.**

The problem is, this may be an intention more than a reality. It’s refreshing, then, to read in a self-study what a program did rather than what it says it will do. A Tennessee school listed the recruiting visits its faculty made to predominantly minority high schools during the year. This helps an accreditation team believe that the diversity plan is for real.

**Good idea... Make sure your faculty members participate in university minority recruitment weekends.** Many students come to college undecided about their major. Being present can influence an undecided student to take the introductory JMC course and lead to additional minority students entering the major.

**Good idea... Send the campus newspaper to high school journalism programs.**

Personal contact with high schools is top recruitment technique

Summer camps  
can form a pipeline  
from high school  
to the university

**Good idea... Create a unique invitation or information source that is sent to prospective minority students.** A private school on the East Coast created a DVD that it mailed to all minorities who applied to the university and expressed interest in communications. The DVD highlighted the school's civil right documentary series and the success of minority graduates. Cause-and-effect is impossible to measure, but the school's minority student percentage increased the following year by 2 percent.

A West Coast university sends recruitment posters to schools with 25 percent or more Latino students. One school mails a brag sheet about current student successes and minority alumni. Another school sends personal letters to all minority students who come to the unit's attention through newspaper articles, National Merit Scholar lists, and individual recommendations.

**Good idea... Sponsor a summer journalism camp or sports media camp.** Such camps can draw heavily from diverse communities. The belief is that "bridging through high school will form a pipeline into college journalism for some students." Unfortunately, one program that does annual summer camps reported that, while the camps offered a valuable public service, no evidence exists that it has led to increased minority enrollment.

One of the nation's best examples of a diversity initiative is in Memphis. Because a number of high schools do not have student newspapers, the journalism department at a local university partnered with the city newspaper and the city schools to create a teen newspaper, written by and for teens. After nine years, 53 teen staff members have chosen JMC majors or minors in colleges nationwide, and 18 have received degrees. Sixteen of those are minority students.

**Good idea... Secure funding for both merit-based and need-based scholarships, some of which can be used to attract minority students.**

We may think of minority recruiting as occurring out of high school, but minority recruiting also can happen on the college campus.

**Good idea... Contact all current university students who earned a B or better in the first English writing course to attend a special information session focusing on JMC as a major.**

At large state universities, the JMC major may be a junior/senior experience. Diversity, then, must be drawn primarily from the current class of sophomores. One school began a mentoring program that paired freshmen and sophomores with juniors and seniors already admitted to the major. However, the program was not successful because "the rate of participation was small." Don't be shy about acknowledging that an idea didn't work. The effort at least showed initiative.

Minority recruiting  
also can occur on  
the college campus

## EXTRANCE REQUIREMENTS

A number of JMC programs have entrance requirements. Some do so because they want only good students entering a professional program, and others seek to control burgeoning student numbers because of limited resources.

Cumulative GPA is the most common entrance requirement. It might be a highly selective standard, such as a 3.2 based on 60 or more hours. Or it might be a minimum standard of 2.0 just to eliminate the student who isn't even maintaining a C average.

**The record is mixed on whether entrance requirements harm student diversity or have no impact**

Almost apologetically, one university defends having an entrance requirement of a 2.0 GPA because “we were drawing too many initial majors lacking a serious work ethic and fundamental writing skills set.”

Another common entrance requirement is successful completion of core JMC courses. It might be one course or two or three. When students apply for admission to the major, they must have made acceptable grades in the core courses.

A third common entrance requirement is a grammar or English examination for the purpose of ensuring that students have a reasonable grasp of writing and language skills.

The purpose of entrance requirements is to discriminate – not in a racial sense, of course, but to discriminate between those students who have a history of being good students (GPA, good language skills) and those who don’t.

But what if entrance requirements do discriminate in a racial sense?

A large Southern program said its admissions requirements “do not disadvantage minorities.” It cited statistics showing that a larger percentage of white students than minority students had been denied admission to the program on the basis of entrance requirements.

Another program’s self-study concluded: “Minority students are not affected by the School’s admission requirements to any greater extent than majority students.” This school offers no appeal process, and students are encouraged to find another major.

A third department reported a 40 percent first-time failure rate on its language skills exam, with a similar failure rate for white and minority students.

However, a Midwestern program that gives a multiple-choice exam on the basics of grammar, spelling and punctuation as an admissions criterion says, “Pedagogical research suggests that students who are members of minority groups are likely to fail writing tests at a disproportionate rate, and the test may indeed be a stumbling block for minority students.” This school reported 20 failing scores among 46 administered tests to minority students in 2006. GPA appears to be not as much a stumbling block. The school reported that 33 of the 39 students who did not have a 2.5 GPA upon applying to enter the JMC major were white.

Many programs with entrance requirements are willing to make exceptions. A Midwest school retains 10 percent of its seats in the beginning writing course for admission appeals that require students of all races to plead their cases in person to the undergraduate coordinator.

More commonly, the need for student diversity is considered a special admissions factor. One school guarantees admission to all students with a 3.0 GPA upon completion of 60 credit hours and completion of course requirements. An admissions committee reviews applicants individually whose academic record is below that level. Additional merit is granted for two criteria: 1) participation in student media or JMC organizations and 2) needs of the industry.

Under the latter category, the committee considers the fact that the industry needs more minorities. As a result, the school said it “makes every effort to admit a minority student who shows promise.” The school reported that minority students enter upper-class status at a rate slightly lower than the overall student population. Once in upper-class status, minority students succeed at an almost identical rate.

**Need for diversity can be a special admissions factor**

Another school with entrance requirements states that its commitment to diversity is an equal factor to work experience, extracurricular activities and expressed goals in the selection process, adding, “The numbers of students of color and other underrepresented groups to be admitted will depend on the comparative credentials of all applicants, but no racial, ethnic or gender-based quotas will be fixed which exclude consideration of any applicants from admission to the school.”

Another said the university’s admissions office makes most decisions and refers to the school those who do not meet the school’s minimum admissions criteria “but who, for a variety of reasons, should receive a less quantitative evaluation. Many such referrals are minorities, and the school tries to admit these minority applicants whenever possible.”

In an effort to enroll a more diverse student body, a prestigious West Coast school has set a lower threshold for admission of underrepresented students to attract a better percentage of males, African Americans, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans. Notice that young men gain special admissions status in this program.

One Florida school said it had used race, ethnicity and gender as factors to admit students who failed to achieve a 2.75 GPA – until the state university system banned special factors. The school said it now places heavier emphasis on recruiting minority students.

## RETENTION

A number of schools say their minority retention rate is roughly equivalent to that of all students, so they have no special retention efforts under way. One diversity plan simply states: “All students are valued, and great effort is made to retain all students who declare a major in the school.”

But some schools, as part of their diversity plans, develop a tracking system to follow the progress of minority students from entry through graduation. With students free to move in and out of majors, tracking the retention of minority students is no easy matter. A Southern school noted, “Although the attempts of the unit are strong in reality and sincere in intent, an effective tracking system is lacking.”

Retention rates vary widely. Top private universities will have a retention rate of 90 percent or higher each year, meaning that nine of every 10 freshmen return to the institution the following year. Flagship state universities typically have lower retention rates because of transfers, and regional state universities have even lower retention rates because they may accept more marginal students at the start. One state school reported a huge gender gap: 59 percent retention of male students and 78 percent retention of female students.

The graduation rate, reported annually by The Education Trust, reports the percentage of students who graduate within six years from the same institution they entered as a freshman. A private school reported a 72 percent African American graduation rate – slightly higher than the graduation rate for white students at the same institution.

As another comparison, a state school reported in its self-study that it had tracked 50 minority students who entered the major within a five-year period and found that 21 had graduated, 13 left the university, 5 were dismissed from the university, and 11 changed majors. If all 11 who changed majors eventually graduate from the same institution, this would represent a 64 percent institutional graduation rate (21 + 11 out of 50). If none of them did, that would be a 42 percent graduation rate.

**Tracking retention is not easy as students often switch majors**

**Be strategic in ways  
to help retention;  
don't just engage  
in wishful thinking**

Retention and graduation rates are more institutional in nature than program-specific.

Students decide to stay in school, or leave, based on personal finances, family issues and other factors often out of the control of the unit. So the diversity plan at one college stated a rather naïve target goal: “Raise the retention rate for underrepresented groups from the freshmen to the junior year each year for the next five years.” That’s a fine goal, and it possibly could be accomplished. But it was a naïve goal, as presented, because no strategies were outlined to move toward that goal. As a result, it comes across as wishful thinking rather than as a strategic objective.

To make minority retention a strategic objective, a program could implement ideas like these drawn from JMC diversity plans:

**Good idea... Hold feedback forums with multicultural students, including international students, to find out how the program can better support them.**

**Good idea... Create a student diversity organization where first-year minority students can be paired with junior and senior mentors.**

**Good idea... Develop a database and listserv of underrepresented students in the department to ensure they receive information about diversity-oriented scholarships, internships and fellowships.**

**Good idea... Pay the registration fee for minority students to participate in minority job fairs and conferences.**