





# *Committed to Diversity*

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By Jamaal Abdul-Alim

Back in the fall of 2016—with the nation in the throes of one of the most contentious elections in history and student protests roiling campuses nationwide—admission leaders at the University of Texas at Austin gave prospective students and their families a unique look at the kind of spirited discussions students were likely to have on campus if they enrolled.

Working with Dr. Leonard Moore, history professor and associate vice president of Academic Diversity Initiatives in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, admission leaders arranged for families to visit Moore's class, "Race in the Age of Obama."

"This particular course is not only one of, if not the most popular undergraduate courses on campus, but it also has one of the most diverse enrollments, including students from non-minority groups with varying political beliefs," explained Ka'rin Thornburg, associate director of admissions at UT Austin and chair of the NACAC's Inclusion, Access, and Success Committee.

"Given the election this fall, as one could imagine, class discussions were quite passionate," Thornburg said.

She explained that one particular visit to Moore's class followed a "campus climate issue surrounding a student organization's characterization of admission affirmative action policies."

"Dr. Moore incorporated this incident into his discussion," Thornburg said. "Our prospective students and families visiting the class that day told the admission counselors how much they appreciated the visit—that it was a 'lively' but healthy discussion and that it was reassuring to know this kind of discourse was encouraged and facilitated."

The course visit at UT Austin is remarkable for a number of reasons—not the least of which the school happens to be ground zero in the nation's debate about the merits of using race-conscious affirmative action in admission because of the *Fisher v. University of Texas* US Supreme Court case.

But the class visit is also the type of thing that experts say colleges and universities should do more of to give prospective students a more authentic experience as opposed to just presenting them with brochures filled with pictures of happy-looking students.

Experts also say now—amid the spirited discussions and debates about race, privilege, and inequality on campus—is a good time for admission and enrollment professionals to collaborate to develop new ways to engage students around issues of diversity and inclusion.

"These are certainly shifting and volatile times on campus, with issues regarding diversity and inclusion front and center," said Jennifer Desjarlais, a consultant in the education practice of the executive search firm Witt/Kieffer, as well as a co-leader of the firm's enrollment practice.

"However, change can spell opportunity," Desjarlais said. "For admission and enrollment professionals and leaders, it is a chance to review and reconsider standard approaches, practices, and policies—in discussion with the president, colleagues in leadership roles across different departments, campus representatives, and especially students—then realign them according to institutional priorities.

"Institutions are looking for leaders and staff who embrace current challenges," Desjarlais said.

At Pomona College, an admission administrator said the admission office has begun to focus on giving students a clearer sense of what campus life entails.

"We've actually shifted our program significantly to: How do we make sure that students get an accurate portrayal of what this college is going to be like when they come so they don't feel like we lied to them about the experience," explained Ashley Pallie, associate dean of admissions at Pomona College.

"That's an active conversation," Pallie said. "We have to talk to our current students and say, 'Hey, you can't be protesting the night before and then show up on a panel and say everything is good because you want to make sure there's representation of you on this campus.'"

Instead, current students should be encouraged to tell prospective students "what it's like to be here."

"Tell them in a hopeful way, like you would still want to be at this place, but it takes work," Pallie said.

It is also important for admission officers to be deliberate about making sure that incoming classes are diverse and reflective of the local population.

While diversity should be a focal point of a university's mission, the admission office must take on an active role to help execute that mission, Pallie said.

"We have a very, very diverse class, and that is incredibly intentional," Pallie said, citing figures that show 50 percent of the student population are domestic students of color, up from 42 percent in recent times. "We don't believe students are going to show up in our pool unless we put the resources and strong effort and energy into that.

"So that's where we put our time and energy, going into schools sometimes where students may not know about us, or pursuing avenues where we can go and see a student and their family where they are," Pallie said. "That's really important. That might mean going to more public schools, more rural schools, and when we go out and make these grand speeches about why students should go to college, we tailor those speeches to the students we are working with."

Pallie said it's important for admission officers to help make sure the diversity found within the surrounding population is "evident on our campus."

"If Pomona is located in southern California, Pomona should also look like southern California in so many ways," Pallie said.

At the same time, Pallie said it's important to support students once they are enrolled on campus, not just focus on getting them to enroll.

With regard to such, Pallie pointed to a "cohort" program in which students from underrepresented groups and who are studying math and science enter the college as a group.

The cohorts share a faculty mentor and take the same courses together during the first year.

"And that's been particularly powerful," Pallie said. "It's not a program where we say like, 'Oh, these student need additional help.' It's not like there's something wrong with them.

"It's like, 'No, there's something about being able to be around people who are like you who you feel comfortable with.'"

The idea of having a faculty mentor for the cohorts is to make students in the cohorts more comfortable with faculty instead of being intimidated.

"This is not a faculty person who's a scary person but this is someone who cares about me and wants me to be academically successful," Pallie explained.



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That's what Quinton McArthur, associate director of admissions and director of Diversity and Targeted Outreach at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, did several years ago when he helped develop  $\sqrt{\text{mathroots}}$ —a two-week mathematical “talent accelerator” summer program for “high-potential” high school students from underrepresented backgrounds. Some but not all of the program participants have gone on to MIT.

“Essentially it’s an opportunity to introduce high-achieving black and Latino students to competition math because one of the areas that there is significant underrepresentation at the high school level is in this competition math community,” McArthur said. “There’s a pipeline of students here in America who are plugged into this opportunity and taking advantage of it, and the vast majority of those students are our Caucasian and Asian young brothers and sisters, and that’s great, that’s fantastic that they’re involved,” he said of competition math in general. “But we’re just trying to open up the doors and trying to identify more black and Latino students who would enjoy and benefit from this experience.

“We’ve had a lot of success and we’re really hopeful that a lot of these students will major in mathematics in particular, definitely STEM more broadly, but mathematics in particular, and then go on to hopefully graduate school and future careers in mathematics,” McArthur said.

McArthur said he developed the program on his own time after work. “The work that I’ve done on the  $\sqrt{\text{mathroots}}$  program was completely outside my job as an admission officer,” McArthur said. “I worked on it at night for months, building it slowly until it got to a point where others could help advance the idea.”

McArthur said although he doesn’t have a background in STEM, he saw the need for such a program based on his experience as an admission officer.

“One of the things I recognized coming to MIT initially is that opportunities, even at the highest level, are still very segregated,” McArthur

said. “There are places where these opportunities are readily available and there are other places that nobody has any idea about these opportunities.

“As admission officers, we have a unique viewpoint on the educational pipeline because we see so many different schools, so many difference resources and lack thereof, that we have an insight into communities that sometimes they don’t recognize and others don’t recognize,” McArthur continued. “If you’ve been in college admission, particularly selective college admission, you’ve seen patterns emerge from different schools and different places, and I think personally that we do have a responsibility to provide guidance and intervention in order to improve the state of affairs.

“If you care about people, you should do something,” McArthur said. “It’s that simple for me.” McArthur said it’s also important for admission officers to have the backing of the institution where they work.

“I just happen to be in a space where I’m in a good place for innovation and they’re always supportive of good ideas here at MIT, and I have supportive supervisors who let me work on this type of thing when I wasn’t reading a million applications, and so I just made it happen,” McArthur said.

Desjarlais echoed McArthur’s thoughts on the unique role that admission officers can play in having an impact on issues of diversity and inclusion on campus.

“Enrollment management and admission officers have a unique perspective on many facets of an institution and are working more directly with their presidents, heads of student affairs, chief financial officers, and many others,” Desjarlais said. “They also have a clear picture of what’s happening off campus as well.

“They are students of and experts on changing demographics and diversifying communities, and can help their institutions change with society,” Desjarlais said. “Admission and enrollment leaders help their institutions to see beyond themselves.” 

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