

## Lessons Learned:

# Success in Graduate School for Minority Students

The rigors of graduate school are tough for everyone, but if you're a member of an under-represented group on campus, you probably face additional hurdles. Psychology professor Kecia Thomas led a panel of UGA faculty members in a discussion of life as a minority graduate student or faculty member. Summarized below are some of the challenges panel members discussed and strategies they identified for succeeding as a minority graduate student or future faculty member.

### Seven Challenges

**1. Pressure to represent the larger race or ethnic group:** This may come in the form of being asked to offer a "black" or "Asian" perspective – or even to speak for all minority groups – in class discussions, being expected to repeatedly participate in departmental or college panels and committees because you are the only minority faculty member, or pressure to overachieve in order to exude a positive image of one's group. Research shows that minority communities do expect successful members, such as graduate students, to be good examples of the community, which creates a heavy load for students to carry.

**2. Dealing with stereotypes:** The most pervasive stereotype minority students and faculty report facing is that they were only accepted to their program, hired or granted tenure because of their race or ethnicity.

**3. Deciding whether to blend into your department or program versus standing out:** Minority students sometimes feel they must choose between either subverting their own cultural identities to become part of the larger group or accepting a stand-out role as "the" minority student in the program.

**4. Difficulties teaching (and being part of) a student body with little diversity:** It can be daunting to stand in front of a class of undergraduates all from a racial or ethnic group other than your own, not sure whether they understand you. It can be particularly difficult to have open discussions about race: when there is one student of color in an otherwise-white class, white students often won't speak

frankly in fear of offending the minority student, while the single minority student feels isolated. Finally, attending classes with so little cultural diversity does not adequately prepare students for the more diverse work world.

**5. Small numbers of minority professors and the need to increase faculty diversity:** Having relatively few minority faculty members on campus reduces the number of potential mentors who can advise students about surviving graduate school as a student from an under-represented group. The small numbers of minorities in faculty positions in academia as a whole may pose challenges for future faculty members of color, who will likely face search committees devoid of minorities and few opportunities for formal and informal mentorship.

**6. Lack of cultural understanding from faculty and other students:** A Hispanic student, for example, who misses two weeks of class to care for an ailing family member may be perceived as not caring about her studies, whereas, in reality, aiding a family member is the acceptable behavior in her cultural group.

**7. Lack of entertainment/leisure time/community-building opportunities in Athens:** Many African-American students, in particular, are compelled to look to Atlanta for such out-of-school experiences.

### Seven Strategies

**1. Be aware of the pressures:** Research shows that just being aware of the intense pressure the larger ethnic or racial community places on them to over-achieve – and the realization that it is not simply one's own perception – helps students. Connect with other minority students or faculty, even if you have to go outside your own department. They can help legitimate the stress you feel.

**2. Don't take on so much that you set yourself up for failure:** If you have the desire to present a positive representation of your cultural group through your achievements, use that desire for extra motivation to succeed, but balance it with your personal needs. Stress

reduces cognitive functioning and makes you less able to tackle the educational challenges of school. You may make it your mission to dispel stereotypes about your cultural group, but this is often a losing proposition. Success renders anyone atypical, and, as you excel, others may cease to see you as representative of your cultural group. (The fact that you are in graduate school – regardless of your race or background – makes you exceptional.)

**3. Cultivate a dual identity:** Try to think of yourself both as a member of your department or program and as a member of your racial, ethnic or cultural group. Get involved with groups and activities related to both. You can fit in without disappearing.

**4. Find a mentor:** A minority faculty member can offer advice about navigating the challenges of graduate school as a minority student. Some panelists felt this was critical. Others thought it was most important to find a mentor interested in you as a student (and your work), regardless of his or her cultural background.

**5. Build cross-group alliances:** Join a campus organization and work with organizations representing other minority groups to help promote cultural understanding. Speak up about the need for greater diversity and take your complaints to people with the power to take action.

**6. Facilitate hiring and retention of minority faculty members:** Insist that your department notify students when positions are open. Then recommend eligible candidates of color. Be welcoming toward existing faculty and candidates from minority groups.

**7. Graduate and get a job:** Graduate students of color are tomorrow's faculty members of color. Figure out what you must do to be successful in your discipline and start now, whether it's research, publishing, presenting at conferences or writing grants. Take advantage of all the resources of the Graduate School and the University. Be proactive in marketing yourself when you attend academic events. Because few minorities have parents or grandparents in academia to provide informal mentoring and introduction to academic culture, cultivate opportunities for more formal mentorship in graduate school. Finally, consider coming back to UGA to teach. ■

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*Based on the Graduate School seminar "Minority Faculty and Minority Graduate Students: Lessons Learned," a panel discussion led by Kecia Thomas, Department of Psychology. To view this seminar in full, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.*

### Resources for Minority Graduate Students at UGA

#### Graduate and Professional Scholars

GAPS is a graduate student organization dedicated to providing social, academic and professional opportunities for minority graduate students.

[www.uga.edu/gaps](http://www.uga.edu/gaps)

#### Black Law Students Association

Organization for black law school students at UGA.

[www.law.uga.edu/blsa](http://www.law.uga.edu/blsa)

#### Office of Institutional Diversity

Among other services, the office coordinates a mentor programs for African American, Appalachian American, Asian American, Hispanic and Native American students.

[www.uga.edu/diversity](http://www.uga.edu/diversity)

#### Office of Multicultural Services and Programs

Formerly the Office of Minority Services and Programs, the office sponsors activities featuring prominent scholars, popular speakers, art exhibits and programs to enhance cultural diversity.

[www.uga.edu/mssp](http://www.uga.edu/mssp)

#### African American Cultural Center

Provides cultural outlets and networking opportunities for African American students; has a conference rooms, meeting rooms and a computer center for student use.

[www.uga.edu/aacc](http://www.uga.edu/aacc)