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Planting seeds for PhD's: Project encourages minorities to earn doctoral degrees in business, enter academia

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Students meet with different schools at a recent college fair.

With college and university commencement exercises completed for the spring, graduates are now beginning the next chapter in their lives.

For two particular groups of undergraduates – African Americans and Hispanics with business degrees – the likelihood they encountered an African American or Hispanic at the helm of the business school or a faculty member are slim, according to the results of recent study.

The PhD. Project, an organization formed to increase the number of Blacks and Hispanics in academia at the university level, found that among the 1,601 business schools in the U.S., African Americans are dean of just 33 – or 2 percent. Hispanic Americans account for just nine – or 0.5 percent – of deans.

The project also found the representation of African Americans and Hispanics on the boards of large businesses is greater than the number of business colleges' faculty. Blacks represent 8.5 percent of directors at the largest 200 S&P 500 companies, and Hispanics account for 4.5 percent of director seats at those companies, according to an authoritative industry report. Of the 200 largest businesses, 73 percent have at least one African American director, and 47 percent have at least one Hispanic American director.

Although the study's intent is to place business schools' faculty and race into perspective, other studies suggest that many African American and Hispanic undergraduates earn business degrees. According to *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, in 2007, of the more than 146,000 undergraduate degrees awarded to African Americans, 35 percent of them were in business management and administration. In 2005, 22 percent of the 101,000-plus undergraduate business degrees earned by Hispanics were in business, as noted by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Since there are more minority students earning these degrees, it makes sense for colleges and universities to recruit faculty that is more reflective of its student makeup. Bernard J. Milano, The Ph.D. Project's co-founder, said diverse faculty is crucial to student success in the classroom.

"Business schools have long recognized the value of attracting and educating a diverse group of MBA, undergraduate and doctoral students, but when minority students look at business school faculties and leadership, they see very few people who look like them. This can send the signal that business isn't for them, said Milano, who also serves as president of the KPMG Foundation, creator and lead sponsor of the project.

"Placing more role models and potential mentors in front of the classroom and in the Dean's office will help to attract more underrepresented minorities to business studies and business careers – a goal we all share."

Milano also notes Native Americans are also extremely underrepresented (4 percent) as faculty members at those 1,601 business schools.

"This serves as a deterrent to young undergraduates choosing a major or a college, and deprives those minorities who do study business of role models, mentors, and career coaches who could help them succeed academically. Business schools are very supportive of and involved in The PhD Project in an effort to improve faculty diversity."

The University of North Texas, University of Texas at Dallas, and University of Texas at Arlington are the local institutions aligned with project.

Marilyn Wiley, Ph.D., senior associate dean in the College of Business at North Texas, said it is extremely difficult to recruit and hire minority faculty members in business right now, as there are very few black and Hispanic students in doctoral programs.

"One of the goals of the PhD project is to grow this population. They assist minority students in preparing for and finding doctoral programs in business. They form a network to help these students succeed and graduate. As the pool of minority Ph.D.'s grows, we hope to make our faculty more representative of the community we serve."

Hasan Pirkul, Ph.D., dean of the Naveen Jindal School of Management and Caruth Chair of Management at the University of Texas at Dallas, echoes Wiley's concern. Pirkul said the university does have a solid number of Asian American faculty members and

students. According to university statistics, seven of UT-Dallas' faculty members consider themselves African American, while six members are considered Hispanic.

"We are continuing to address racial diversity – primarily caused by a lack of diverse candidates. One solution is to increase enrollments of African Americans and Hispanics in Ph.D. programs in business."

Wiley said minorities and women who major in business at the undergraduate and graduate levels must "see the possible;" in other words, they see faculty members who look like them and have found success in academics and the business world.

"It is extremely helpful to students to have role models in the classroom with whom they can identify and who may share similar backgrounds or cultures," she said. "Minority students benefit from working with successful minority faculty who can help them understand unique issues they may face in their own careers."

Milano added: "Students of color have to wonder if they have arrived at the right place. It is wonderful to a minority student to knock on the door of a minority professor who understands what he is going through, to provide understanding and a trusting ear. You can't perform to your potential when you are not comfortable."

Learn more about The Ph.D. Project at www.phdproject.org.