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Education Columnist Holly K. Hacker

## Diversity in grad schools is crucial

They're our future professors, researchers and national leaders.

So ideally, graduate students should come from all ethnicities and backgrounds.

But too often that's still not the case.

A new report by the Council of Graduate Schools offers some hope, however. More blacks and Hispanics are working on master's and doctoral degrees – though their numbers are still small in many programs, especially ones that produce engineers, scientists and mathematicians.

"Without any question we have made progress, and the numbers show that. But we are halfway home with a long way to go," said Debra W. Stewart, president of the graduate school council.

When people talk of diversity on college campuses, the focus is usually on undergraduates, especially freshmen. That's understandable – after all, it's the entry point to higher education.

And in Texas, there's continuing debate over a college admissions law that was meant to keep campuses diverse. The Top 10 Percent law, as it's called, lets students who graduate in the top 10th of their class attend any public university in the state.

But even if you never go to grad school, you should care about those who do.

"A diverse graduate student population is crucial to having a diverse professional class – in humanities, science, technology, education and business – down the line," said Rhonda Blair, president of Southern Methodist University's faculty senate.

At a back-to-school gathering of faculty last month, Dr. Blair noted a shortage of female and minority professors on the hilltop. A diverse faculty, she said, helps make all students feel welcome on campus.

As Texas becomes increasingly diverse, graduate school needs to be a realistic option for all qualified students, said Rick Giardino, dean of graduate studies at Texas A&M University.

"The ones who have graduate degrees are the real drivers of the economy," he said – not to mention they significantly boost their earning power.

Enrollment figures at Texas A&M, the state's second-largest research university, underscore the challenges. Minority graduate enrollment is up 10 percent this fall in College Station, based on early reports. Yet blacks still make up less than 4 percent of the pool, and Hispanics less than 7 percent.

To improve those numbers, Texas A&M is in its third year of offering "diversity fellowships" that cover three years of graduate school tuition and fees, plus a stipend. The program tries to improve diversity for any group that is underrepresented in a field, such as women in engineering.

Texas A&M also started a graduate recruiting fair geared toward minority students. College Station hosted the inaugural fair in March, and the University of Texas at Austin and Texas Tech plan to host future fairs, Dr. Giardino said.

But attracting students to graduate school is only half the battle; it's just as important to make sure they finish. Attrition is a problem for everyone – only 50 to 60 percent of students who start Ph.D. programs finish, Dr. Stewart said. But minorities and women are less likely than others to graduate within seven years.

To help solve that problem, colleges can make sure students know all the career doors a graduate degree can open. UT-El Paso, for instance, offers a professional science master's degree that prepares students for careers in accounting, business, chemistry and other fields.

Universities – and businesses that hire their graduates – help make graduate school affordable. Gretchen Bataille, the University of North Texas' new president, cited a program by KPMG to prepare more minority business professors – and ultimately attract more minorities to the field.

Dr. Stewart, of the graduate schools council, said having a diverse pool of graduate students will become more important as the country competes on the global stage.

She just returned from a graduate education conference in Austria, where participants learned that Europe plans to graduate 700,000 more students with Ph.D.s in the next few years. China produces about 20,000 Ph.D.s a year, Dr. Stewart said, mostly in engineering and science.

The U.S. awarded 44,000 doctoral degrees last year – less than half of them in engineering and science.

"To the extent we don't pay serious attention to what's happening in graduate education," Dr. Stewart said, "we put this country at huge risk."