## MEMO

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| **DATE:** | May 9, 2023 |
| **TO:** | Graduate Coordinators, Department Heads, Graduate Assoc. Deans, Deans |
| **FROM:** | Jim Ahern, Vice Provost & Dean, School of Graduate Education |
| | Zebadiah Hall, Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion |
| **RE:** | Inclusion, Equity, and Belonging in U.W. Graduate Education |

UW has made progress in diversifying graduate education in recent years. Since 2018, our enrollment of underrepresented domestic minorities has grown by 44%, and the graduate school's Underrepresented Domestic Minority Graduate Assistantship program, the university's comprehensive recruitment marketing, and its renewed commitment to DEI efforts, have all played a role in this progress. Some positive changes have been made in our graduate admissions to emphasize potential rather than privilege (e.g., UW ended its institutional GRE minimums requirement, and many UW graduate programs no longer require GRE scores at all). To better support diverse graduate students, the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the graduate school have collaborated to create the Diverse Graduate Student Mentoring Program, which brings together diverse graduate students and faculty mentors from across campus. **Progress it is, but we are a long way from success.**

We, as an institution, struggle to be an inclusive place for our graduate students. As an institution, we believe in high "quality" and "rigor" in graduate education, but too often we don't look carefully at what we mean when we invoke these words. I think most of us can agree that "quality" means that our students are given the teaching, resources, experiences, and skills to become successful professionals. "Rigor" is often posited as the high expectations that we implement that help achieve "quality." Where things go wrong is when "quality" and "rigor" get confused with "tradition" and "hidden barriers." Traditions are not all bad, but they are cultural. Many faculty are privileged in having had many opportunities to be enculturated into higher education. We know the language, the structures, and the mechanisms of academia, and this knowledge means that we are able to navigate college, graduate school, and being faculty with relative ease. For graduate students from diverse backgrounds, such privilege is much rarer, and many are first generation college graduates.

In addition to the usual challenges of graduate school, most diverse graduate students face the steep uphill climb of feeling like they belong and matter within the complexities of higher education. On its own, that's a lot for faculty to process and comprehend, but it is up to us to create a welcoming environment where diverse graduate students and all graduate students can thrive. Most notably, as with any culture, higher education has structures and behaviors that are exclusionary (i.e., hidden barriers). Such exclusionary things should not be confused with

"rigor." A good example of such exclusionary practices is when funding and research opportunities are not effectively communicated to all students in a program and when the process for awarding such opportunities is not transparent. Such practices exclude potentially qualified students, and this does absolutely nothing to promote "quality" and "rigor."

We must look carefully at our processes, policies, and behaviors to minimize exclusionary practices that have very little to do with "rigor" and "quality." Some recommendations:

- **Onboarding**: all graduate programs should have an effective onboarding/orientation process that should not assume that incoming students have any knowledge of available resources, processes, and policies. Cohort and community building are also an important part of onboarding. Strong positive relationships among students and between students and faculty and staff are essential for helping students become enculturated and successful.
- **Equitable Access to Funding and Research Opportunities**: all graduate programs should clearly communicate funding and research opportunities and their eligibility criteria to all graduate students in the program. Furthermore, selection processes should be as transparent as possible, while preserving personal information.
- **Individual Mentoring Plans**: we encourage all programs to implement Individual Mentoring Plans (IMP), so expectations for both students and for their faculty and programs are clearly spelled out. Individual Mentoring Plans should be reviewed annually by the student and the student's committee or the program's graduate committee. When IMP expectations are not being met, whether by the student or the faculty/program, steps should be taken to help to meet those expectations. Examples of Individual Mentoring Agreements can be found here: https://rackham.umich.edu/faculty-and-staff/resources-for-directors/mentoring/
- **Prevent Silo-ing**: all graduate students need to have community beyond their lab/research group. Graduate programs should encourage their students to participate in departmental, college, and university organizations and activities and make sure that students build connections with a diverse range of faculty and students. For example, faculty should encourage participation in the Diverse Graduate Student Mentoring Program, the Graduate Student Network, ASUW, Multicultural Affairs, etc. in addition to disciplinary organizations, and faculty need to make sure that participation, including the time it takes, is valued.