

The challenges of implementing a diversity admissions policy

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The push-back was strong when we sought to increase the diversity of teachers through a modified admissions policy in our education degree program.

The makeup of the Canadian population is changing rapidly. The percentage of the population who identify as Indigenous is increasing; the percentage of new immigrants who are from racial, ethnic or linguistic minority groups is growing; those who identify as LGBTQ are feeling increasingly safe to be open about their identities; and individuals with disabilities are making dynamic contributions to Canadian society. Although our communities are becoming increasingly diverse, the makeup of the teaching profession remains relatively stagnant, with white, female teachers making up more than 80 percent of the teaching force. While our communities are becoming richer with diversity, the teaching profession is not.

To address this lack of diversity, we need to examine the admissions policies in Bachelor of Education programs. Deans, associate deans and directors in faculties and colleges of education must be willing to consider revising or rewriting these policies in an effort to challenge the homogeneity that dominates the teaching profession.

Such deliberations led to the new diversity admissions policy at the University of Manitoba's faculty of education. The policy aims to admit up to 45 percent of our students (or about 110 of 245 places) through five diversity categories. These categories include people who identify as: Indigenous, Métis or Inuit (15 percent); having a disability (7.5 percent); LGBTQ (7.5 percent); being a racialized minority (7.5 percent); or being socially disadvantaged (7.5 percent).

The percentage allocated to each category is an enrolment target and not a quota. Whereas quotas are often filled regardless of qualifications, enrolment targets set spaces aside to fill with applicants who both meet the minimum admissions standards and self-identify within one or more of these categories. Any unfilled spaces in one category will be reallocated to the other categories in order to achieve the highest diversity of students as possible. Any remaining unfilled diversity admission spots will then be reallocated back to the general pool, thereby filling all remaining admission spaces.

The faculty committee responsible for teacher education programs at the University of Manitoba (U of M) reviewed the research on diversity in the teaching workforce in North America and held a series of consultations with our education, community and university partners. Based on what we heard and learned, we revised the policy dozens of times. We considered tough questions and responded to the thoughtful, and sometimes harsh, criticism to improve and defend the policy. After 3½ years of work, under the stewardship of two different associate deans responsible for undergraduate programs, the U of M's Senate approved the policy in January 2016.

a surprising turn of events

When the university issued a media release a few weeks later to announce that the policy had been approved, things took a surprising, and sometimes, ugly turn. For weeks, there were requests for interviews from the media, questions from students from numerous faculties, and emails from staff in departments across campus, including requests to respond to members of the public who were threatening to withdraw financial support from the university. Many of the inquiries were variants of the same question: How is this policy fair?

We responded by creating a "Frequently Asked Questions" sheet for distribution, worked with our Education Student Council to host an information panel, wrote an op-ed piece for the local newspaper, had discussions with faculty

members as well as students and staff across campus, and participated in interviews with both local and national media. It was a huge and unforeseen time commitment, but time we were willing to invest to support the policy and foster conversations about why diversity matters.

The volume of negative comments surprised us and illustrates a serious problem in our collective understandings of issues of diversity and equity, both within the academy and among members of the general public. We relied on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and decisions by various Canadian human rights tribunals to inform the policy and to counter the arguments that the policy was discriminatory. We explained that the charter not only protects people by ensuring that all are treated equally regardless of race, gender, ability, and so on, but also that it recognizes the need for equity initiatives, and does so by supporting policies and actions that aim to ameliorate the socio-historical disadvantage of certain groups in society.

An example of such disadvantage is found in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report, which details the ways in which legislation and policy affected – and continues to affect – thousands of Indigenous people through intergenerational trauma, systemic discrimination and racism. We find other examples in the ways in which school districts have enacted policies and practices that marginalize teachers (and students) who identify as LGBTQ by not allowing them to openly recognize their identities in schools.

Another concern that dominated national media coverage about our new policy focused on the claim that it discriminates against male applicants who might want to become teachers. However, this policy is not meant to be a gender-equity policy and none of the categories, including the general category, preclude men from applying. While recognizing that there are fewer men who become teachers (most discrepant in the elementary grades), this is not due to a social or historic disadvantage, but rather is likely due to the ways in which society has constructed teaching as “women’s work,” which tends to be devalued. The gender imbalances and inequities within teaching remain a legitimate issue within the profession and require an entirely different approach to begin to rectify it.

Sometimes we were asked a variation of, “Shouldn’t someone who declares that she is a lesbian have to prove it? How will you verify that the applicant is telling the truth?” Issues of identity and self-identification are personal, political and sometimes risky matters. Because of policies and practices that may promote racism and homophobia, people can feel at risk in identifying with a category that threatens further marginalization. We are committed to maintaining the principles of self-identification, confidentiality, and a belief in the integrity of our applicants. Requiring documentation to “prove” one’s identity only reinforces the hegemonic power of the university and its officials to adjudicate identity claims.

Like all admissions documentation, applicants are required to attest to the fact that the information they have submitted is true and accurate. Those who falsify their applications will be dealt with through existing university admissions policies. Simply put, we want applicants to feel safe in making a self-declaration of identity and to have their self-declared identities honoured.

what makes an effective teacher?

Some tried to argue that the diversity admission policy disadvantages the so-called “best and brightest” from being admitted to the Bachelor of Education program. This concern is problematic in that it contains implicit discrimination, insinuating that those admitted through the diversity categories are “less smart” than those who are not. Equally problematic, this argument places an unwarranted confidence in grade point averages as reflections of “brightness.” There is no evidence to suggest that students with the highest grade point averages make the most effective teachers.

The new policy does not change the entrance requirements for application to our program, which requires a minimum grade point average and the completion of a recognized Bachelor’s degree. These minimum standards ensure that all of those deemed “admissible” have demonstrated a level of academic achievement sufficient to enter our program.

At the heart of this policy is a recognition that diversity enriches our experiences. All children deserve the opportunity to be exposed to diverse perspectives and to have access to an education that prepares them to flourish in our increasingly diverse communities. Unfortunately, these considerations were often overlooked in the criticisms of the policy. Rather, the policy invoked a collective anxiety, a great concern for what might happen when our individual privilege is seen to be at risk.

What has become important in this debate is the challenge for all us to confront our biases, the prejudices we hold towards others, and the privilege from which we benefit and which simultaneously disadvantages others. Moreover, this process has underscored the tremendous amount of work we still have to do within our institutions. These conversations – no matter how difficult – will lead to greater understanding and help to inform our programs, curricula and pedagogies.

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