

How to Advocate for ... Diversifying Graduate Programs in School Psychology

Renee K. Bastian, BA, Graduate Student

Florida International University

Describe a time when you had to advocate for diversifying a school psychology graduate program.

I am fortunate enough to be a part of a diverse graduate program in school psychology here at FIU in Miami. However, it is not lost on me that the field of school psychology is not very diverse at all. For this reason, I have made it a point to advocate for diversifying school psychology as a whole through engaging in research opportunities that look at issues with recruitment and retention of diverse graduate students and practitioners in our field. This past summer, my program faculty invited me and my classmate Quennie Dong to work on a manuscript entitled “Incorporating Social Justice Advocacy and Interdisciplinary Collaborative Training in the Recruitment and Retention of Diverse Graduate Students,” which was published in *Contemporary School Psychology* (Pham et al., 2020). We were then fortunate enough to present elements of this paper during the 47th Annual Florida Association of School Psychologists Conference and encourage other programs and practitioners to advocate for increased social justice practices and recruitment and retention efforts of diverse students within their programs.

What are some of the most important factors or things to know about diversifying graduate programs in school psychology?

Some of the most important factors to consider are the barriers impacting the shortage of diverse students (e.g., finances, lack of exposure to the field of school psychology, lack of knowledge about the role of a school psychologist, factors at the university and program levels) and ways to address them at the peer, program, and district levels.

What advice would you give individuals just starting their graduate careers on how to advocate for diversifying their graduate program/field of school psychology?

The beginning of graduate school can be a difficult transition. During this time, graduate students might want to engage in research to better understand the critical factors impacting the shortage of diverse individuals in school psychology. They might also think about the changes that they would like to see within their own program with regard to diversification, and what other students feel is missing. From there, they can discuss with a trusted faculty member that this is an issue that they are passionate about and have noticed in their own program.

What advice would you give individuals in the middle of their graduate careers on how to advocate for diversifying their graduate program/field of school psychology?

Individuals in the middle of their graduate careers may want to take their efforts a step further and engage in action steps based on their research. At FIU, for example, students at all levels of the program are able to be involved in the admissions committee. Students may want to assist their program directors with efforts toward recruitment of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Some recommendations for recruitment might include increasing undergraduate outreach by presenting to education and psychology classes and student organizations and emphasizing the program's focus and commitment to social justice (if applicable). They might also try to develop ways to support their newer cohorts of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds through the development of committees (such as social justice committees or inclusion and diversity committees) that may help with leadership and inclusion opportunities for diverse students.

What advice would you give individuals toward the end of their graduate careers on how to advocate for diversifying their graduate program/field of school psychology?

Advanced graduate students may wish to continue to engage in research and steps toward retaining diverse students in their program and branch out toward field-based efforts. Students can impact retention efforts through peer-level support such as mentorship programs, encouraging diverse students to seek leadership positions, and creating ongoing means of both academic and social communication (e.g., email Listservs, cohort and program group chats). These supports foster an environment that is inclusive and supportive of all students. If students wish to advocate for program- and district-level supports to retain diverse students, students should push for opportunities for increased financial assistance (e.g., assistantships, tuition waivers), matching students with faculty and field-based mentors/supervisors of similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds, courses and research dealing with multicultural issues, and hiring culturally and linguistically diverse faculty.

What is the main thing you want readers to know about advocating for recruiting and retaining diverse graduate students?

Do not be afraid to use your voice. Students might not think that they can make major changes, but I have found that we actually can have that kind of power if we make our voices heard. Do your research, seek out leadership roles, and talk to your peers and faculty. We owe it to the students we serve to have a field that is more representative of the diversity they possess. Don't be afraid to advocate for change!

REFERENCE

Pham, A. V., Lazarus, P., Costa, A., Dong, Q., & Bastian, R. (2020). Incorporating Social Justice Advocacy and Interdisciplinary Collaborative Training in the Recruitment and Retention of Diverse Graduate Students. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 1–14.