STEM Recruitment and Beyond: The Messenger is the Medium

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Abstract

We comment on several major factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of specific groups (i.e. racial and ethnic minorities) in Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) educational programs, particularly at the advanced graduate levels. Recognition of the structural inequalities that create and reinforce these disparities leads to suggestions for immediate improvements that in many cases can lead to progress, particularly at the point of personal interaction with potential STEM recruits. A crucial factor in recruitment and retention is students' perception of their own suitability and eligibility. We argue that STEM faculty members, regardless of their ethnic background, are the messengers of this eligibility. Using our method, we were able to substantially increase the number of applications and awards from 2012 to 2014 for racial and ethnic minorities.

Introduction: The Sociology of STEM

Society promotes broad attempts to achieve fairness and equity in opportunities for advancement. In spite of this effort, in some and perhaps many institutions, the issue of underrepresented groups in Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) academic programs and professions looms as a particularly difficult problem. An account of the background leading to the current status quo would require lengthy and complex analysis of the history and conventions within institutions that cause structural inequality. Such an ambitious goal is not addressed here; rather, we comment on several specific factors that we argue inhibit amplification of successful STEM recruitment and retention efforts. We suggest approaches that might immediately address these issues, and therefore lead to potentially rapid improvement. The message that needs to be delivered is that STEM education and careers are suitable for students from underrepresented groups. More effective delivery, we argue, requires that the messengers portray and demonstrate this message to the targeted audience, often on a one-to-one level. Some preliminary data suggests the efficacy of the proposed approach.

Before delving into the specifics of this study, we remark that STEM inclusion for minorities and disadvantaged groups is a problem that presents a national challenge (Xie, Fang and Shauman, 2015) within a global context (Craig et al, 2011). Awareness of these problems has grown substantially and numerous modern programs have been instituted to address issues based on local cultural conditions, for example in promoting inclusion of indigenous peoples in New Zealand (Bishop et al, 2009) and Australia (Advance Queensland, 2018). In some cultures, as with Dalits in India (Ghose, 2003), the challenges are significant, and progress in literacy is a necessary first step towards greater equity (Nambissan, 1996). Here we focus on local conditions as pertains to STEM inclusion in Delaware in the US, while we recognize that similar impediments and analogous solutions may be relevant elsewhere.

Background

The Delaware Space Grant Consortium (DESGC) is a multi-institutional organization supported by the NASA Office of Education to advance the training of the next generation of STEM professionals in areas of interest to NASA. There are Space Grant programs throughout the US, funded by the Office of Education within NASA. One of the main purposes of the programs is to ensure an adequate supply of individuals with technical training to support NASA's future workforce. There is also an obvious broader impact in society as the importance of STEM expertise extends far beyond NASA's anticipated hiring needs. A major activity of Delaware Space Grant is the evaluation, selection, and funding of sponsored undergraduate tuition scholarships, summer research opportunities, and full-year once-renewable graduate fellowships. Recipients are students who reside within or very near the jurisdictions of the consortium institutions.

Over the past twenty years, the performance of the DESGC in terms of support of students from underrepresented groups has been patchy. The consortium has sometimes done well, and sometimes not so well, in spite of good intentions. Twice, the consortium issued a formal notice that performance in the area of diversity needed to improve. A main motivation for the present discussion and study has been the path of our improvement plan, in alterations to the program that we have carried out and planned in response to the most recent shortcomings. An overarching theme is a movement towards *promoting* diversity, and not simply supporting diversity in STEM recruitment activities.

Defining the Problem

The issues that we face in Space Grant recruitment specifically and in STEM recruitment in general are not particular to the STEM area, or to the Delaware jurisdiction, but instead are issues affecting all of higher education. It is reasonable to attribute a number of these issues to structural inequality, both in terms of historical precedents, and in current procedures and practices. For the purposes of this paper, the authors have defined structural inequality in the U.S. to be a state of affairs in which minorities are not provided the same resources or opportunities for a quality education as whites, whether this be an intentional circumstance or not. (For a more detailed discussion of structural inequality see Lopez, Gurin, and Nagda's 1998 *Education and Understanding Structural Causes for Group Inequalities*). This inequality can be associated, for example, with poverty leaving certain communities with less funding, worse teachers, and disproportionate dropout rates, all of which disadvantage these groups in terms of opportunities for STEM training and potential STEM careers. In high poverty areas, math classes are often taught by teachers who are not credentialed in mathematics, and science classes are most often taught by teachers who are three times less likely to have science credentials than those who teach in low-poverty schooled communities (Hudley, 2016). When it comes to test scores, the average 17- year old Black high school student is four years behind the average white student; this 17-year old 12th grade student scores lower than a white 8th grade student in subjects such as reading, math, U.S. History, and geography (Harris 2010, Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2003). These adverse conditions involve several major causes that will require great effort and resources to ameliorate, much of which must originate from collective efforts through government. But there is also a persistent set of grass-roots problems that can be addressed at the micro level, beginning with individuals.

We need to clarify the goals for increasing the num-

ber of Underrepresented Minorities (UM) in STEM in order to isolate the problems encountered in attaining them. The goals include: (1) For the collective benefit of society, achieve a situation in which society may benefit from the talents and productive work of all its citizens; and (2) From the perspective of social justice, achieve a situation in which all citizens, including those from historically UM groups, will have access to opportunities for higher education and participation in an increasingly technological society. For the present purpose, we will assume that the institutions of higher education are committed to achieving these two goals.

The relevant issues may be summarized by a statement of problems: (*Problem 1*) Due to complex factors related to structural inequality, UM students often do not view opportunities in higher education as suitable for their application or targeted for their participation. Consequently, traditional means of recruitment are frequently not effective in soliciting applications from UM populations. Many feel like outsiders, and conclude quickly, "This is not really for me!" This reaction is exacerbated by the lack of minority professors in academia, especially in STEM disciplines. Simply put, when a Black student from a disadvantaged community has exposure to STEM programs and departments, he or she usually does not see Black faces in that group. The same is obviously also an issue for Hispanic students and other UM groups. This situation further alienates UM students and creates cultural dissonance for them. Until there are more UM STEM professionals in place, cultural inequity will remain a problem that reinforces the greater issue of disparity. (*Problem 2*) When UM students do apply for STEM programs, their applications are often not evaluated in a way that seeks to recognize the incompletely realized talents and/or alternative assets that these students may bring to the table. An especially pernicious reaction that some STEM academics fall into is the opinion that a completely blind evaluation will solve any issues related to inequality and prejudice. It can be difficult to convince such fair-minded academics that this approach misses the opportunity to find worthy UM STEM candidates; (*Problem 3*) Non-minority faculty often have good intentions, and feel that a perfectly "fair" and flat set of rules is sufficient to resolve all diversity issues. However, often this effort is not enough, and imbalances in representation persist after long periods of what appears to be fair selection processes. In many cases, there appears to be a lack of recognition of the need to engage UM group cultural differences in the process of solicitation, application, evaluation, and mentoring to address Problem 1. Likewise, faculty are sometimes reluctant to recognize the need to re-examine their own assumptions regarding academic fairness in the processes of solicitation, application, evaluation, and mentoring, if Problem 2 is to be addressed.

In considering possible approaches to addressing these problems, one important realization has been that academic physicists and engineers are generally not trained in dealing with these diversity issues. These issues in STEM fields are not STEM problems, but sociological problems. This characterization is in some sense obvious -- physicists, chemists, and engineers usually have no such training, but often are possessive of these problems, feeling that they are occurring on STEM turf, and therefore concluding that STEM academics should deal with them. Such a conclusion may be false, and ultimately may delay achieving needed improvements. If diversity programs happen to be working well (and many are), then there need not be a change in approach. But if years of good intentions and stagnant neutral approaches are producing undependable and unremarkable improvements, then it makes sense to take a fresh approach. The DESGC approach was enlisting a Black male Criminologist (the first author of this paper), trained in Sociology as an Associate Director to analyze and plan the diversity program, interacting with both faculty and students to affect change regarding the issues associated with the problems outlined above. This action has led to a number of new approaches that may be viewed in effect as interventions on a micro-level.

We have addressed the issue through an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating the role of the discipline of Sociology in STEM (Hillsman, 2013). The new Associate Director's work on the disproportionate representation of minorities in the criminal justice system examines the structural components that contribute to people participating in criminal behavior, but also how society and institutions respond. It is no secret that access to educational resources is a structural component that contributes to the achievement of success in America; the lack of this component can often lead to one taking non-traditional (i.e. illegal) means to pursue success. The Space Grant program offers support in these educational resources. The novel approach was implementing a model that recognizes the complexity of structural inequality and address barriers to quality educational opportunities. More specifically, we have focused on the fact that Space Grant has educational resources that could be directed toward groups that traditionally may not have had such access. The lead author has addressed this STEM problem, employing what would be viewed from a sociological perspective as a micro- and macro-level approach. In this regard, any reasonable model of the problems in STEM recruitment must acknowledge the crucial impact of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, family, and culture.

The first step has been "faculty centered" -- this step is the most critical: the "Buy In." STEM faculty have to understand their own racial, gender, class, and cultural biases and how they impede building trust and rapport with UM students. Being honest about race, class, and gender is a must. Acknowledging someone's race is not racist; using it against them is racism. Not only is there an understated importance for recognizing and appreciating differences, but there is also the notable importance of acknowledging that you do not know what you do not know. There is a need to recognize that UM students may come from communities still plagued with social issues and historical ailments descending from past and present discrimination. For UM groups, these social issues have built a lack of trust in formal institutions

A second step in our approach is to encourage both faculty and students to "Step Outside the Comfort Zone" (Starks, Harrison, and Denhardt, 2011). It is critical for STEM faculty to recognize that UM students may feel uncomfortable being the minority in the classroom, or in the Physics or Chemistry lab. Advice for faculty would include talking with students after class, inviting them to their offices, and asking these kids where they come from, about their background, and what in their lives is important to them. Be honest!! It is of course highly important for UM students to see someone who looks like themselves in such a respectable leadership position as a college professor, but the current situation is such that this recognition is a relatively rare occurrence. Consequently, given the disproportionate representation of STEM faculty, honest conversation is key to building constructive and encouraging relationships. This relationship can establish a more inclusive atmosphere to combat the alienation that UM students often feel in STEM.

Along students' educational journeys, there are often individuals who recognize their untapped potential. Sometimes these individuals share similar backgrounds with their students, but often they do not look like them. We refer to these individuals as the "Messenger." These people learn to get comfortable facing uncomfortable situations, challenge themselves to be self-reflective, and gain the knowledge and confidence needed to reach out to students who may have very different backgrounds, life experiences, and perspectives. Getting outside their comfort zone, Messengers are able to recognize promise in their students and reach them in a meaningful and effective way in order to encourage their students to strive for greater goals. It is important that faculty members who are not UM strive for greater cultural competency and understanding so that they might be able to develop these types of relationships with students in order to offer resources, opportunities, and support that are invaluable for students' success.

A third intervention is to promote an "Ethic of Care" among STEM faculty and administrations. How many STEM faculty are bothered by the fact that there is underrepresentation of minority groups? It appears to be fairly common to hear among STEM faculty, "We are doing what we can because the system we set up is colorblind and fair." Is this approach effective? Caring is one of the most difficult challenges in life. It is a selfless approach. Once one cares, the individual must think of others as well as themselves. The pronoun one uses changes from "I" to "we." There must be a sense of urgency, both collective and personal, if we are to change the culture to become

a more diverse STEM family, to the benefit of all.

There are also macro-level issues to address. A key component is the typically chosen methods of publicity used to announce opportunities and available resources. Emails or flyers describing scholarships, internships, or fellowships are often sent to academic departments or placed on bulletin boards for existing STEM majors. Many UM students or potential students are not likely to feel as though these opportunities are intended for them, if the students even see them in the first place. In this regard, reliance on traditional channels should be viewed with skepticism, given that the historical context of distrust of institutions is not working in the favor of UM students or of the STEM faculty who want to see change. We must recognize that we have to go a step further to bring awareness of these resources to UM groups. There is also an issue on the receiving end. The passing down of distrust of institutions is a protective tool for many minority parents and families, as this is a way to reduce disappointment for their children. We must acknowledge that the institutions that faculty often trust to disseminate information about opportunities have historically not been intended to offer resources to the UM population. Communities of color are well aware of this institutional discrimination and are quick to remind the youth of that fact. This issue cannot be ignored if we truly intend to change these outcomes.

Having frequent and frank discussions with non-minority faculty leads to the realization that some faculty may be well intentioned, yet have very little idea on how to proceed. Some faculty are anxious about even discussing race, class, or gender, given the current fear of discussing these subjects in broader society. It may be necessary to remind our colleagues that, while these topics are sensitive, we must be more accountable about ignoring the conversation simply because it makes many of us uncomfortable. Underrepresented minority groups will continue to be alienated if this approach continues.

Another macro-approach that we recognized in our jurisdiction is related to the location of the Space Grant Symposium. Delaware Space Grant Symposium held its first ever symposium on the campus of Delaware State University (DSU), the only Historically Black College/University in the consortium; historically symposia have been held at the University of Delaware. This move was to bring more visibility to Space Grant programs to the minority students on DSU campus. The turnout was phenomenal -- the most representation of minority students ever in the history of Delaware Space Grant research symposia! At this symposium, the DESGC coordinator sat at a table in the entrance way, distributed name tags, and asked all attendees to sign in and provide contact information. The conversations and contact information served as a new line of communication as we have worked to improve diversity in Delaware Space Grant programs. At the research symposia, direct personal conversations helped to build the trust and rapport needed to be able to communicate with the students via email. They no longer saw the invitations to participate as spam or an opportunity not intended for them. Led by our sociologist, this new approach has taken hold within the DESGC, and the effect has been very positive. We have meetings, for example, in which we openly discuss the nature, feasibility, ethics, and implementation of possible alternative evaluation tracks for student applications. Through these discussions, the non-minority faculty become better motivated and informed regarding these issues. The results can be dramatic.

Beginning in Spring 2012, discussions began between the coauthors concerning the ideas presented in this paper. After hearing [first author's] ideas, the second author, a Professor of Physics and Associated Director of DESGC introduced the possibility of [first author] becoming involved in DESGC while networking with students and faculty during the April 2012 research symposium. Eventually, [first author] was made an Associate Director in Fall 2012, and was responsible for presenting strategies to NASA Headquarters as part of the DESGC diversity improvement plan required by NASA. Since that time, [first author's] proactive approach, capsulized in the title of this article, has increasingly been implemented in Space Grant operations. We include this information in our narrative to emphasize the following point, which has been implicit in the improvements to our activities: While many STEM faculty recognize that there are problems in recruitment and retention of UM in STEM education, there is often a deficit in understanding how to proceed. It is a simple fact that STEM faculty are not trained in STEM recruitment and

Year	Black	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	White	Hispanic	Native American	Other	Pacific Islander	Year Total
2000			1	15			6		22
2001	4		1	24			11		40
2002	2		1	26			2		31
2003			1	28		1	2	1	33
2004	1			28					29
2005				13					13
2006	3		1	17			1		22
2007	2		3	30					35
2008	2		3	38	1		1		45
2009	5		1	44	1				51
2010	5		3	55			3		66
2011	5		4	45	3				57
2012	5		3	40	2	1			51
2013	9		5	48		1	6		69
2014	18	1	8	53					81
Race Total	61	1	35	504	7	3	32	1	Total 645

Table 1: Applicants by Race/Ethnicity and Year

YEAR	Black	Asian	White	Hispanic	Native American	Other	Pacific Islander	Year Total
2000			14			6		20
2001	2	1	21			10		34
2002	1		22			2		25
2003		1	22		1	2	1	27
2004	1		22					23
2005			11					11
2006	2	1	13			1		17
2007	2	3	20					25
2008	1	3	33			1		38
2009	4	1	44	1				50
2010	3		23					26
2011	4	4	30	3				41
2012	4	1	33	2				40
2013	6	1	18		1			26
2014	7	1	18					26
Race Total	37	17	344	6	2	22	1	Total 429

Table 2: Awardees by Race/Ethnicity and Year

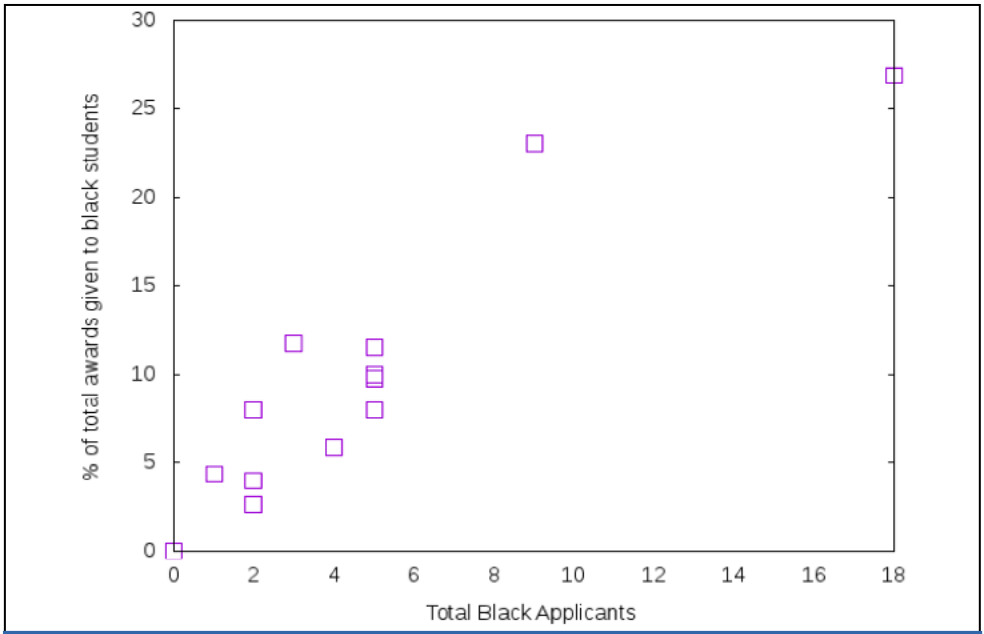

Figure 1. A scatter plot of total number of total number of awards to Black students (vertical axis) vs. total application from Black students (horizontal axis) based on annual data from Delaware Space Grant (See Table 1 and 2). A strong positive correlation is evident.

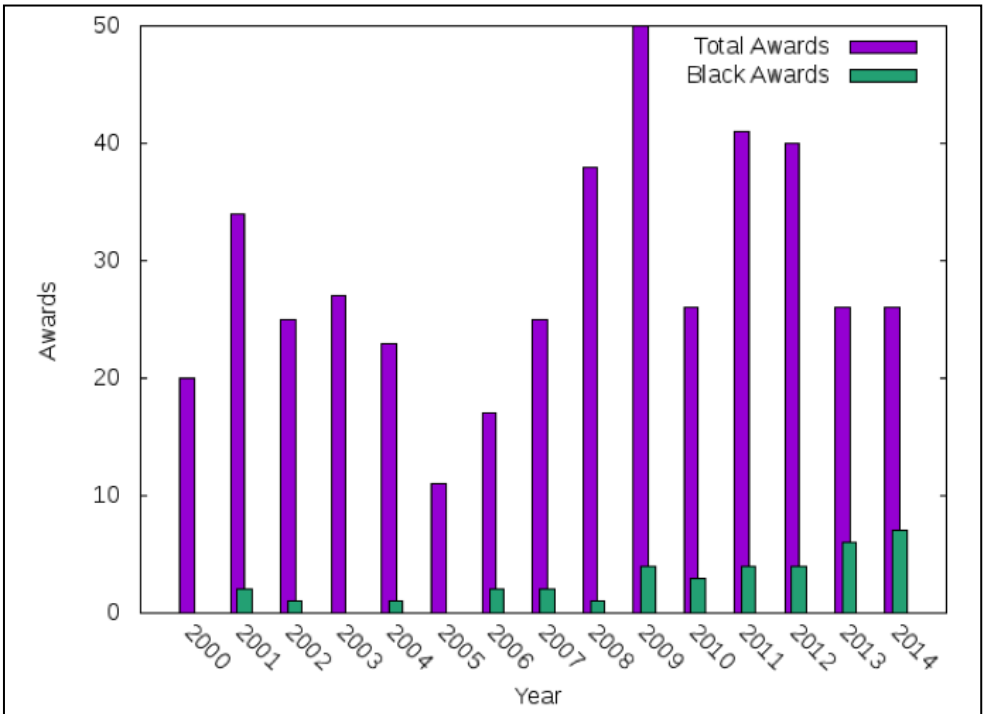

Figure 2. Awards to students by DESGC plotted vs. year from 2000 to 2014. The total awards are shown, juxtaposed with the awards to Black students. The fraction of Black students included in the pool of awardees shows a steady increase.

inclusion. Involvement of a social sciences professional has been a key element in improvements to our programs and activities, and importantly, the attitude of the STEM faculty in our jurisdiction. In short, diversity in STEM is not exclusively a STEM issue. The following brief statistical study evidences the early success of the approach.

Outcomes

Prior to 2013, DE was using traditional means of advertising and soliciting applicants. Beginning in 2013, the innovations discussed here were promoted within our consortium. As we expected, presentations of the ideas presented in this paper (mainly by [first author]) quickly had the effect of inspiring our colleagues in the Delaware consortium to take more proactive stances on UM recruitment. The tables below show the results of those interventions in a statistical format.

Table 1 shows applications by race or ethnicity for the years 2000-2014. The largest number of Black and largest number of Asian applicants both occurred in 2014. The second largest number of Black and of Asian applicants was in 2013. Table 2 shows that the largest number of Black awardees occurred in 2014, with the second largest number occurring in 2013.

Another view of the impact of proactive encouragement of applications for awards from an underrepresented group can be seen in two figures. First, Figure 1 is a scatterplot of the number of awards to Black students, plotted against the total number of Black applicants in a given year. It is apparent that there is a strong positive correlation.

The positive correlation in Figure 1 is encouraging, but this view does not control for total funds available and other factors, so it is useful to see the impact on the diversity of outcomes measured in this case by representation of Black students in the awardees. Figure 2 illustrates this effect based on the same data from DESGC.

Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate that the numbers of applicants and awardees from Delaware State University increased as a result of the implementation of the program. One may conclude from this analysis that the proactive recruitment and encouragement of students from underrepresented groups results in an immediate outcome in terms of improved percentages of participation.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to describe an approach that we have recently implemented in recruitment and support of underrepresented minority students in STEM subjects in the jurisdiction served by the Delaware Space Grant Consortium, which is supported by the NASA Office of Education. The DESGC had been under pressure to improve its performance in terms of awarding a fair share of its resources to UM students. The majority of these awards are for undergraduate tuition awards, undergraduate summer research support, and graduate fellowships. In spite of years of good intentions, the consortium continued to have difficulty in this area of its work. The present approach is essentially interdisciplinary, as we begin with the premise that STEM faculty are not trained in the sociological aspects of STEM recruitment and retention, but that acknowledging sociological approaches is important for developing effective interventions. The core of our plan has been the involvement of sociological analysis, and active participation by a minority sociologist, in the recruitment of UM students to STEM.

Problem 1 will eventually be solved by increasing the number of professors from minority groups at institutions of higher education. In the meantime, current faculty have to find ways to encourage UM students to recognize that their applications and participation are welcome. This need may require faculty stepping outside their comfort zone. Faculty are sometimes reluctant to talk about cultural matters, such as race. However, it needs to be realized that it is okay to talk about race, and to recognize race

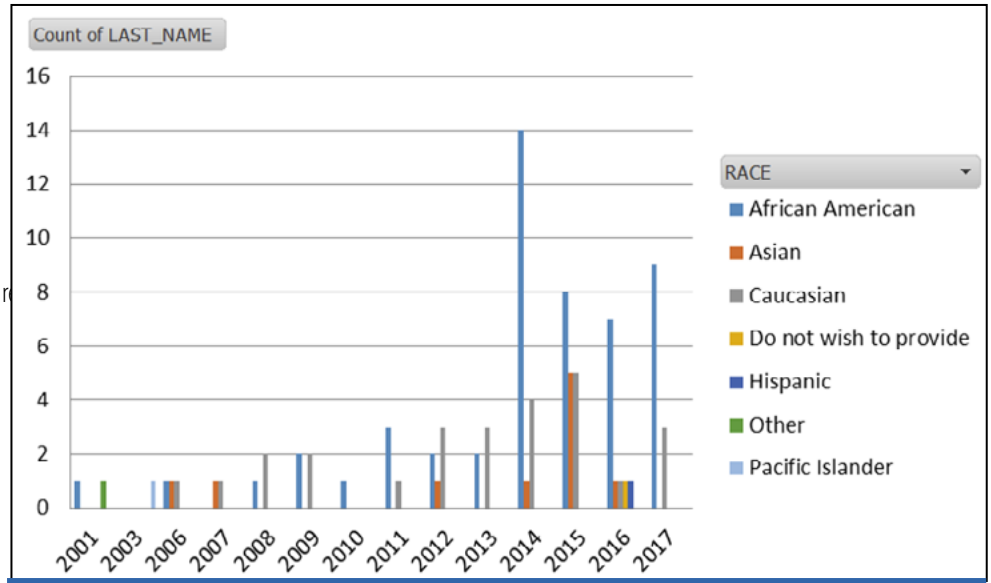

Figure 3. Racial and Ethnic demographics of DSU Applicants

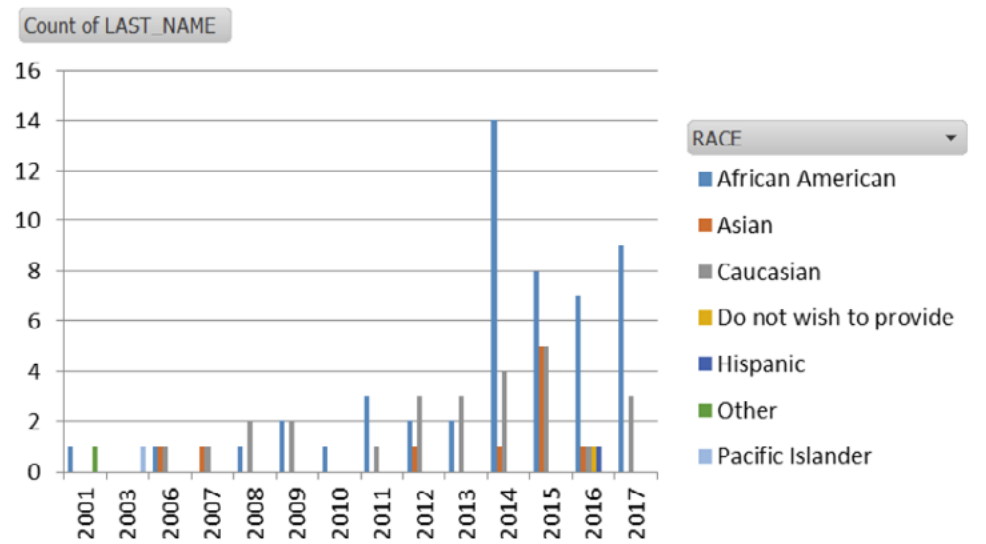

Figure 4. Racial and Ethnic demographics of DSU Awardees

when it is for a constructive and legitimate purpose.

Solving Problem 2 calls for alternative strategies for evaluating applications. For example, a set-aside fraction of positions for evaluation through an alternative path – interviews for example, or searching for unrealized potential in traditional applications. Such strategies can be designed in a way that maintains and even enhances the sense of intrinsic fairness. We intend to further explore and implement such alternative evaluation procedures and report on them at a later time.

Both problems ultimately require that faculty and administrators of higher education institutions recognize their roles as Messengers to the community of UM students. As we look around at other state-level Space Grant programs, and similar programs with other agency or institutional support, we see some indication that some of these programs have had experiences similar to ours, while others have avoided these issues and have long records of successful diversity activities. It is unclear to us at this time what factors distinguish records with varying levels of success. Clearly, further study is required, including quantification of the several factors we have discussed above and the effects of improvements in those areas on quantifiable outcomes. The lead author intends to carry out such studies in order to test and solidify some of the suggestions made here on the basis of our recent local experience.

Acknowledgments

This work has been supported in part by funding from the NASA Office of Education through the Delaware Space Grant Consortium, NASA Grant NNX15AI19H.

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APPENDIX A

Statements demonstrating the effectiveness of the "Being the Messenger" approach on influencing thought conversion among faculty and administrators.

Aaron holds a Ph.D. in Theoretical Astrophysics from California Polytechnical Institute. He was formerly an Assistant Professor, an Associate Director for DESGC, and he has recently retired from private industry. According to Aaron, "The Delaware Space Grant Consortium (DESGC) Advisory Board committed to making improvements in the area of minority recruitment and retention. On the recommendation of DESGC Associate Director Professor William Matthaeus, the board engaged Dr. Brian Chad Starks to help the consortium:

- Bring more minority PhDs into STEM fields to act as mentors.
- Use a sociological perspective that was honest about race, class, and gender differences.
- Step outside our comfort zone to speak to minority students on their terms, to be effective messengers for change.

We have changed internal processes to equitably distribute undergraduate scholarships and graduate fellowships between the state's two PhD granting institutions, one a large state university, the other a historically minority university. Our three-year improvement plan has a metric for diversity included in every major effort. As a long-term member of the Advisory Board, I am proud of these improvements in our offerings to minority and underprivileged students that Professors Starks and Matthaeus helped lead."

According to the Program Coordinator with the Delaware Space Grant Consortium, "Dr. Starks helped me question systems that are influenced by unconscious racism, and I now understand that we all can and should be effective messengers for change. In our main programs (DESG internships, fellowships, and scholarships only), underrepresented minority student applications rose from an average of 3.83 students per year from 2000 – 2013 to an average of 17.25 students per year from 2014 – 2017. Awards to underrepresented minority students have also increased and are up from an average of 2.6 per year from 2000 – 2013 to an average of 8.75 students per year from 2014 – 2017. Additionally, an increase in participation of underrepresented minority students in all DESG programs increased from an average of 3.25 students per year from 2000 – 2013 to an average of 11 students per year from 2014 – 2017. These concepts work – the proof is in the numbers."