

Talking to foreign-born STEM faculty about diversity

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I recently participated in a workshop hosted by [PROMISE](#), the State of Maryland’s NSF Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate (AGEP) program. Among the various presentations and small group discussions during the day, one stood out for its message—and its simplicity. I call it “the talk” because it resembles the “birds and the bees” conversation that many parents dread having. It’s a talk about the biases we all have that may unconsciously lead to favoring certain students over. Sensitive, but necessary.

In this case, the talk was given by an engineering dean concerned about foreign-born faculty who tend to recruit and support, typically through research grants, graduate students from the same countries from which the faculty themselves emigrated. In fact, [foreign-born students](#) account for more than half the U.S. doctorates awarded in most STEM disciplines. The dean related the story of how he had approached his faculty on this issue, and his talk is worth sharing.

The dean in question, himself a minority, compiled the numbers of graduate students supported by each faculty member’s research grants. He noticed a preponderance of nationalities that corresponded to those of the respective professors. So he convened all his faculty at once, distributed tables showing the numbers and students’ countries of origin, and asked for reactions. Most faculty were surprised, but the numbers don’t lie—these are engineers, after all—and

they admitted not being aware of their tendency to select students along national lines.

Next, the dean gently reminded them that these were federal grants awarded to a U.S. university. It was odd that American citizens were hardly represented among the students working with them. Further, given the university's commitment to diversity, namely, to educate students underrepresented in engineering, [the absence of persons of color and women was glaring](#) and hard to defend. He suggested that race, ethnicity, and gender be prominently considered along with the other qualifications of students admitted to the engineering college when they (all men, as it were) make selections of those to receive research assistantships.

But the dean went a step further. He said he understood that, [nationally, engineering lagged most other STEM disciplines in diversifying](#) both its students and faculty. *Their* institution was going to excel because of a value shared by the administration and faculty that diversity was a strength given the demographics of the state and the reputation of the engineering college.

The dean affirmed an institutional value while lauding the faculty and raising its consciousness to something that perhaps no one in authority had ever said to them before. Rather than assume they understood the university goal and the engineering college's aspiration, he had "the talk." He reports that they were grateful, neither resistant nor offended. Moreover, since having the data-driven conversation, the numbers of minority students enrolled have increased. This may be an unusual dean at an unusual state university, but here is an approach to be emulated.

Deans (and department chairs) should assemble the data, muster the courage, and *lead*. Have the talk!

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