

Student questions: Students from SES 496/598 colloquium on “Equity in the Academic Sciences”

2/17/21

Alexa Drew: *“Creating Inclusivity to Improve Retention for Minoritized Students in SESE”*

You are suggesting for classes to be smaller, but wouldn't it be harder to represent a lot of different groups in small class room in contrast of a bigger one. What is your suggestion to ensure that no one feeling underrepresented in a small class environment?

Unfortunately, this is one of those scenarios in which achieving a better represented classroom may take time. Currently the retention rates for minoritized students are due to a number of factors, and one of them is due to classes being too large for them to get equitable access to resources they need to succeed. Numerous other barriers then snowball into an environment that is not very welcoming. Thus, although reducing classroom may make a student feel less represented in the beginning, my research has indicated this is less likely to cause a student to leave academia versus the current issues these students are facing. When combined with some of the presented recommendations, this will work to support minoritized students more than ever before so they can graduate. As a result of this increased retention, future students will find themselves among more of their peers simply because fewer students will be leaving academia. A more welcoming environment has also shown to attract even more minoritized students from around the world as news slowly gets out that a school helps students of all backgrounds succeed and be supported. For the more immediate problem of underrepresentation though, one suggestion was for more social clubs to be created as this can help all students connect more with the community as well as feel less isolated and/or underrepresented.

Are there any social norms that slow down making academia more inclusive?

So many, but a recurring norm I found in my research was that there is no room for feelings in STEM and especially not for accommodations. Allowing or providing for that can have some feeling like there is less credibility in their field of study. Additionally, careers that focus primarily on objectivity can sometimes see qualitative research as less legitimate compared to quantitative research. This hard versus soft science debate, can cause the latter to be viewed through an extra critical lens to the point where any valid research those fields have made are seen as invalid by STEM professionals. This stigma significantly slows down inclusivity progress.

A more generalized social norm is the prevalent “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” norm mentality in achievement driven societies. Succeeding against all odds with little help is a popular narrative, but in reality, most do not succeed without some kind of help regardless of if they are aware of it. This is where privilege comes into play, but there is a stigma against this too as depending on how it is explained, it can cause some to feel they are being told that everything was handed to them or that their challenges were minimal. This can be very hurtful to those who did face very real challenges, especially in their upbringing. However, it is equally hurtful to look at those who have challenges related to their gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and so on without acknowledging those struggles as an added layer of difficulty that these individuals must overcome. Everyone has challenges and they are all valid. Getting help for them does not make someone weak or lazy and it doesn't mean they are looking for excuses as to why they

aren't at some arbitrary level of success determined by society. However, trying to communicate this without making some feel attacked and others less supported is a very difficult line to walk due to the social norms of what is seen as a valid level of success.