



Dear Labby,

I am on the admissions committee for the PhD program at my medical school. Last year, the Dean of the Graduate School proposed a special program for minority applicants with GPAs and GREs at or above our usual threshold but with more limited (or no) undergraduate research experience due to limited opportunities that had been available at their institutions. The plan is for two to three such students to be accepted (out of a total incoming class of approximately 75) and given preferential research mentorship during their first year. They would not only do the usual lab rotations, but would be assigned an overarching research mentor to help them navigate the shoals.

I raised an objection, based on the fact that all our first-year students get considerable research exposure through the rotations, and mentorship is already expected of those lab heads. I wondered if just adding a special research mentor would really accomplish much. The Dean responded that the absence of (or limitations of) research exposure as an undergraduate can unfairly compromise opportunities for students entering a program such as ours. I asked him if that meant knowing how to use a pH meter or something more. He said: “Something more.”

Then I found out that the new program will permit these special students to audit, not take for credit, our first-year core course (known on campus as the “Great Slayer of the Less than Able”). Again, I protested. Since these students have fine GPAs and GREs, why coddle and set them apart in our first-year course, risking stigmatization? The Dean said that this course auditing plan was intended to allow the students to devote the necessary time in the lab rotations to catch up on what other students learned in undergraduate research experiences. The audit plan also recognizes that the students’ fundamental grasp of core principles was not in doubt. While that may be the intent, the perception may be something else entirely: that they are not up to the challenge. This may be complicated by the fact that a significant number of our “regular” entering class this summer are minorities. So will the “special” minority students feel supported or singled out? What will other students think? On this the Dean came close at least to agreeing with me, saying “nonstigmatization is the greatest challenge.”

My bottom line is that some of our regular students end up not being as great as their “undergraduate research experience” might have predicted, while others become stars once they have really gotten into their graduate career. Do we need to create, and likely stigmatize, a small subset of entering students as if they are wearing a T-shirt that says “Please bear with me—I didn’t do an undergraduate research project?” While the Dean and some other members of the admissions committee have expressed concerns about my motive in raising these issues, I believe I am not biased or prejudiced in any way, and that my record over the years attests to that. I am just trying to apply common sense. What does Labby think?

—An Admissions Committee Dissident

Dear Admissions Committee Dissident,

Some graduate programs (such as yours) place undergraduate research experience on a pedestal among admission criteria. This is likely because—let’s face it—such experience excites faculty members who hope to attract experienced students to their labs for rotations and perhaps PhD research. The new program you describe attempts to place a few applicants without research experience, but qualified according to all other criteria, on an even playing field by the end of their first year. Your concerns address likely effectiveness, cost (stigmatization), and rationale.

One senses that you have no core resistance to the affirmative action intent. Given that the underlying philosophy isn’t a concern, let’s dissect your issues. If one has not had an undergraduate research experience, one may not have had a professor say one afternoon something like: “You are clearly enjoying this” or “You may have a feel for this.” Thousands of successful scientists have, in their memoirs, characterized such words as transformative. So it is not just the actual lab experience, it is the direct encounters with people who have mastered research and suggested a special calling or facility. Thus, your Dean’s comment “Something more” was right on. In the new program you describe, not having an undergraduate research experience may have placed the special students *at an unfair, and thus discriminatory, disadvantage*; this constitutes the moral myocardium of the issue. An issue you did not raise, however, nor apparently does this new program address, is what about nonminority students who have competitive GPAs and GREs but also no research experience? No generalizations should be made about the presence or lack of undergraduate research opportunities at so-called minority colleges or universities any more than this should be done for institutions without a predominantly minority enrollment. Perhaps this important point has been considered in designing the new program.

DEAR Labby

Your second concern is about such students auditing the first-year course. Labby agrees with you. All the other students have to adjust their time between this “killer” course and their concurrent lab rotations. Plus, the special students you describe all had fine GPAs and GREs, so it is not clear they need or deserve remedial help in the classroom. You might press this issue with the Dean. This also goes to the issue of stigma.

Labby believes that to the extent that a disenfranchisement of any ethnic or racial group has occurred in history, then it has not happened without intent. Those in power during the genesis and perpetuation of such discrimination may be gone, but their sad legacy requires us to stand up and catalyze the transformative steps. So intent to discriminate must be followed by intent to compensate for such discrimination. The best solution would be to accommodate all new members of a profession’s guild under an expanding tent of shared vision. Your query honestly portrays the angst surrounding such efforts, while opening the subject in a sincere and honest way. The ASCB’s Minorities Affairs Committee has long been deliberating such matters, and your superb query will also reach the Committee’s attention. Thank you for addressing this issue. ■

—Labby



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