

# How better funding can increase the number and diversity of doctoral students

September 28 2021, by Shaun M. Dougherty, Walter G. Ecton

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When a doctoral program in education introduced a comprehensive funding package that covered tuition, it led to an increase in the number of applicants. The increase in the share of Black applicants and enrollees was particularly notable.

That's according to a [new study](#) published in [AERA Open](#), a peer-reviewed, open-access journal of the American Educational Research Association. We did the study with co-authors [Chris Bennett](#), [Kenny Nienhuser](#) and [Milagros Castillo-Montoya](#).

The funding, which was offered to [doctoral program](#) applicants in the form of a fellowship during two application cycles, included four years of guaranteed free tuition. The applicants were trying to get into the college of education at a large public research university in the Northeast. Tuition at the college was \$15,000 for in-state students and \$35,000 for out-of-state students. In addition to covering their tuition, the fellowship included a guaranteed stipend of \$22,000 to \$24,000 for research assistant work as well as travel to conferences and highly subsidized health insurance.

Because of state budget constraints, university funding for this fellowship was available for only two cycles of [applicant](#) groups. Still, this enabled us to compare those two groups with those that came before and after. It also allowed us to compare them with applicants to other programs across the university who were not eligible for the fellowship. In the first year of the [program](#), overall applications increased by 28%, from 133 to 170. Moreover, the share of program applicants who were Black grew from 4.5% to 11.2%.

For students who are thinking about applying to a doctoral program, financial concerns can be among the most [significant barriers](#). This is particularly the case for Black and Latino families with [less wealth](#). Black students face far greater levels of [student loan debt](#) on average than [white students](#). Research has also shown that Latino students are generally [more averse to taking out student loans](#) than other groups.

Given the [relative lack](#) of [diversity](#) among [university faculty](#), initiatives that attract students from groups that are currently underrepresented in doctoral education carry great benefits for society. This is because doctoral students often go on to positions that advance scientific knowledge and drive debates about culture, politics and more. Research has also shown that researchers from demographically underrepresented groups tend to [innovate more](#) in research.

Moreover, some universities are located in states with affirmative action bans. Given the restrictive nature of such bans, it is worth noting that the doctoral fellowship program was race-neutral. That is to say, race and ethnicity did not determine who received the fellowship in this case. However, given the greater impact of the fellowship for Black students in particular, this doctoral fellowship may offer one way for colleges to increase [student](#) diversity in their doctoral programs, even in the face of limits imposed by affirmative action bans and other restrictions on initiatives that are more explicitly based on race or ethnicity.

After two years of the doctoral fellowship program, the college of education discontinued the fellowship for future groups because of financial constraints.

After the fellowship ended, application and enrollment numbers and racial or ethnic diversity returned to numbers similar to those beforehand. For example, the proportion of new enrollees who were Black declined from 22% to 10% in the first year after the fellowship ended. Given [research](#) suggesting that Black and Latino students, in particular, value programs with inclusive and supportive environments when deciding where to apply, one thing to consider is whether doctoral programs might have become even more diverse if the [fellowship](#) had stayed in place longer.

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