The Provost Graduate Fellowship: Q&A with Provost Beverly Davenport

In keeping with the University of Cincinnati’s ongoing commitment to diversity, the Graduate School is creating a new fellowship opportunity for underrepresented minorities: the Provost Graduate Fellowship. The program will award three incoming PhD students a three-year, $25,000 fellowship that includes full tuition. Provost Beverly Davenport discusses why she sponsored the fellowships and the value that diversity brings to the academic enterprise.

How did you decide to start a fellowship from the ground up instead of expand an older program such as the Yates Fellowship Program?

Well, these fellowships are like the Yates in that they are intended to increase our diversity at the university level. But the Yates are used as add-ons, extra money to attract underrepresented students through summer support or a stipend above and beyond the usual. Departments weren’t getting new, fully funded fellowships to help grow diversity in their programs, and that’s what the Provost Graduate Fellowships do.

Why does the Provost Graduate Fellowship come out of your office?

As the chief academic officer of the university, I want to invest in graduate education. There are a whole host of academic issues that I could invest in, and I try to choose the ones that need the most support. There was a void at the university level for these types of fellowships, so I wanted to fill that. Your budget should follow your values.

How does diversity add value to graduate education?

Diversity adds value in every way. It brings a broader array of perspectives and intellectual contributions. It also changes the questions we ask, the ways in which we approach them, the
creative endeavors we produce, and the results of all our work. I’m a social scientist, and we have said for years that we cannot solve the world’s great challenges if we continue to sit at the table with people trained exactly the way we were.

Take the water problem in Flint, MI. We need people with lived experiences in communities like Flint to study it, and we need people trained in public policy, toxicology, social justice, engineering, sociology and other fields to understand what is happening and why.

**What makes this fellowship important to you?**

First and foremost, it represents the values of the institution. Recruiting a more diverse group of students helps develop a more diverse faculty pipeline; it represents an investment in diversity and inclusion. It helps provide access to the highest levels of education, which may not otherwise be accessible to those most underrepresented in our doctoral programs. These fellowships also provide opportunities similar to the one I was given in graduate school at The University of Michigan, where I was awarded a Rackham Fellowship. By seeding these first three fellowships, we will hopefully encourage donors to step up and provide matching funds to name additional fellowships for graduate students. The financial support I received made it possible for me to engage in my work and not worry about how I was going to pay my rent—it made all the difference in the world, and I hope these fellowships do the same for someone else.

**Why does the Provost Graduate Fellowship focus on incoming PhD students?**

The PhD is the pipeline to the next generation of faculty. Supporting graduate students at this level is part of the path to diversifying future faculty, and whether or not we can persuade them to stay at UC, we have an obligation to the academy as a whole. It takes encouragement and engagement early on to get students excited about pursuing careers as future faculty members, and the path to a more diverse faculty is to make graduate education more accessible and desirable to a broader community.

**Many graduate students take longer than three years to finish a doctoral program. Why limit the fellowships to that amount of time?**

There are two reasons. First, it’s an incentive for students to be very mindful of staying on track. We don’t want students to take 11 years to finish a degree! Second, we want the departments to share our investment in these students by contributing to at least a year of support or longer when necessary.

**How will academic programs at UC benefit from these fellowships?**

This is a way for us to bring the very best students into our labs, onto our research teams and into our classes. These are the kinds of students faculty should work hard to recruit because they make our work better. I don’t know any distinguished, productive professors who get their work done without having bright, productive graduate students around them. They are the apprentices in the workshops of intellectual activity.
What long-term impacts do you hope the Provost Graduate Fellowships will have?

For our students, finances are part of the challenge, but so is discovering the potential of the academy – the potential of a career in solving important problems and creating new ways of seeing and knowing. I was going to law school until my senior year; I didn’t know anybody who had a PhD, much less what I’d do with one if I got one. These fellowships will help create good academic role models for our underrepresented students. We need different perspectives to better represent who this country is, what problems need to be addressed, who stand in our classrooms and who become our most knowledgeable citizens.