

# Critical Mass

## Background

- Diversity goals may be associated with efforts to achieve critical mass—one benchmark for gauging success so long as any action neither harms nor benefits.
- Critical mass focuses on key issues that are principally internal to the institution—aligned with core teaching and learning objectives.
- Critical mass can be understood in light of the following:

A minority group (especially one that has been discriminated against) is easily marginalized when only a small presence in a larger population....As the group's presence and level of participation grows, at a particular point the perspective of members of the minority group and the character of relations between minority and non-minority changes qualitatively . . . . The discrete point [at which this occurs] is known as 'critical mass.

The critical mass should be “neither a rigid quota nor an amorphous concept defying definition. Instead, it should be a contextual benchmark use to exceed token numbers and to promote the robust exchange of ideas and views that is so central to the Law School's mission.

- Not a legal concept—comes from social science

## What the Research Says

### **The Numbers . . .**

- **11-17%** of class = underrepresented minority students: University of Michigan Law School Policy [*Grutter*] (Equivalent to discipline?)
- **10%** of class = female cadets: District court view regarding “critical mass” that might be achieved at VMI, sufficient “to provide the female cadets with a positive educational experience.” [*U.S. v. Virginia*]

**BUT...**it's really more than the numbers...

- “[T]here is no identifiable magic number that signals that there is ‘enough’ racial diversity in the student composition....” [Chang et al., 2002]
- Critical mass is ultimately defined with reference to the particular setting in which race-based assumptions dissipate, behaviors shift, and a more robust learning environment is established

**SO . . . What's the unit of analysis (discipline, institution, classroom)?  
What's the right denominator?**

## **Conduct of Inclusion: Sample Questions (A “Holistic Review”)**

1. Have you either experienced discrimination or barriers to achievement, felt isolated in your residential setting or educational and professional/work experience (or identified the existence of these or other barriers), and then removed such barriers and created an inclusive community for others? Describe.
2. Have you ever mentored or collaborated with a student/faculty member/staff from a different background, perspective or experience from your own (e.g., a different race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, political perspective)? Was the collaboration with student/staff successful? Explain.
3. How much and what kind of contact have you had as an educator/supervisor with students/ staff of different backgrounds, perspectives and experiences from your own? Were you able to achieve equal success with students/staff of such differences? Explain.
4. For students: Have you experienced close collaboration with faculty members of different backgrounds, perspectives, or experiences from your own? Were you able to successfully bridge any differences? Explain.
5. For faculty: Have you helped an undergraduate with a background, perspectives, or experiences different from your own access a PhD program, or a junior staffer with a different background advance his or her career? Mentored such a PhD to completion? Hired such a postdoc into your lab? Describe.
6. What has been your experience educating people around you about the issues that people of different groups encounter in higher education and research?