DLMP Diversity Month Celebration - Diversity in Graduate Education

In celebration of Diversity Month, we spoke with Dr. Bill Mahoney about the role of diversity, mentorship, and intentional outreach in graduate education. As director of the Molecular Medicine and Mechanisms of Disease (M3D) PhD program in the Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology (DLMP), Mahoney has spent almost two decades helping shape the program's mission and culture. In this conversation, he reflects on how the program has evolved, why inclusive recruitment matters, and what it takes to support students from a wide range of backgrounds.

MELANIE SHEARS, PHD
INTERVIEWER

Melanie: Thank you so much for agreeing to chat with me today. To start, could you tell us a little about your journey into DLMP and how you became involved in graduate education?

Bill: I came to the University of Washington about twenty-two years ago as a postdoctoral fellow. I had completed my PhD at the University of Maryland studying cardiac hypertrophy, but I wanted to expand my research perspective. At UW I joined Steve Schwartz's lab and worked in vascular biology, studying the differences between arteries and veins and how vascular systems develop.

Over time I became involved in larger collaborative efforts around cardiovascular biology and regenerative medicine. I joined the faculty in 2008 and continued that research. Around that same time, I also started becoming involved in leadership of the graduate program that was then called the Molecular Basis of Disease program. I took over admissions around 2010 and eventually became the program director.

But my interest in training really goes back even earlier. As an undergraduate I went to a small liberal arts college where I worked closely with a faculty mentor in a research lab from my first year through graduation. That experience showed me how important good mentorship and community are in shaping scientists.

Melanie: You would have been an Assistant Professor at that time you began leadership of graduate programs. What motivated you to take on that responsibility early in your career?

Bill: I've always been interested in the environment that trainees experience. During graduate school I was involved in the Graduate Student Association and helped with admissions activities. When I came to UW as a postdoc, I was part of the first group working at the South Lake Union campus.

At that time, the research community there was still developing, and many of us felt somewhat disconnected from the main campus. So a group of postdocs created what we called the South Lake Union Group—"the SLUGs." We organized professional development talks, social events, and other activities to build a stronger scientific community.

By the time I became faculty, continuing to work in that space—supporting trainees and building community—it was a natural next step.

Melanie: The graduate program has evolved significantly since you took over. Could you talk about how it developed into the M3D program we know today?

Bill: When I first became involved in admissions, the program was quite small. We received maybe twenty to thirty applications each year and enrolled classes of two to five students. A few of us realized that it was difficult to create a strong intellectual and social community with numbers that small.

We started thinking about how to grow the program while also clarifying its identity. One key step was building stronger partnerships with the Department of Medicine so that our students would have access to a broader range of research labs.

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At the same time, the School of Medicine had a Molecular Medicine training program that had been supported by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. When that funding period ended, there was an opportunity to merge the two efforts. After several years of planning, that led to the creation of the Molecular Medicine and Mechanisms of Disease—M3D—program around 2013–2014.

What distinguishes the program is its focus on disease. Many graduate programs begin with molecular pathways or cell biology questions. Our students begin with the disease itself and the patients affected by it.

We reinforce that perspective by including a clinical co-mentor on each student's committee—someone who works with patients and can bring clinical perspective into discussions about the research.

Melanie: Another theme that comes up frequently in conversations about graduate education is outreach. How do you approach recruiting students and building interest in the program?

Bill: Outreach is essential, and it has to be intentional. You can't assume that talented students will discover your program. Each year we attend conferences such as SACNAS (Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science) and ABRCMS (Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minoritized Scientists), which bring together students from a wide range of institutions and backgrounds who are interested in biomedical research careers.

At those meetings we certainly do traditional recruitment activities, but the most valuable interactions often happen in mentoring conversations or during poster sessions.

What's unique about those conferences is that you often meet students early in their academic journeys—sometimes when they're sophomores. You might see the same student again the following year and continue the conversation about graduate school.

Those relationships can make a real difference. When someone takes the time to engage with a student's work and encourage them, it can help them see themselves as part of the scientific community.

Melanie: Once students join the M3D program, what kinds of efforts help foster inclusion and belonging?

Bill: There are many layers of support. At the university level, the Graduate School offers initiatives like the First-Generation program, which supports students who are the first in their families to pursue higher education. There are also programs focused on equity, mentorship, and leadership development led by the Office of Graduate Student Affairs and the Office of Graduate Student Equity & Excellence.

Within DLMP and the M3D program, we also have initiatives like *Humans of Science*, where faculty and trainees share personal stories about their career paths and the challenges they've faced along the way. The goal is to demystify academic careers and create space for open conversations about the experiences people bring with them.

Students can also connect through affinity groups and campus organizations, and because our trainees are spread across several research campuses—including UW, Fred Hutch, and Seattle Children's—they have access to a wide range of programming.

Melanie: Taking a broader view, how do you think the department and the program are doing when it comes to DEI?

Bill: I think we've made meaningful progress. Before the merger that created DLMP, the Pathology department had a student-run diversity committee. After the merger, that work expanded into a larger departmental effort that includes faculty, staff, residents, and trainees.

Like many institutions, we're also navigating a national environment where conversations about diversity and inclusion are changing. But at the University of Washington, the message from leadership has been consistent: our core values haven't changed. We still believe that opportunity should be open to everyone.

The important thing is continuing to do the work—supporting students, improving mentorship, and creating pathways into science for people from many different backgrounds.

Melanie: Looking ahead, what do you see as the most important opportunities for growth in this space?

Bill: One thing I've learned is that you can't force people to participate in every program or initiative. Students and faculty already have very full schedules.

What we can do is make sure there are many opportunities available and integrate conversations about mentorship, well-being, and inclusion into everyday discussions about science and training.

For example, when I give talks about mentorship, I often include sections about mental health or about meeting trainees where they are. Those themes are connected to building healthy research environments.

More broadly, I believe that science benefits from diverse perspectives—whether those differences come from identity, life experience, or academic background. When you bring together people who approach problems in different ways, you expand the possibilities for discovery.

Melanie: As we celebrate Diversity Month, do you have any final reflections on the importance of this work?

Bill: I think we're fortunate to work at a university that continues to support the idea that higher education should be accessible and welcoming to everyone.

I have colleagues in other parts of the country who are navigating very different circumstances right now, and that can make it harder for them to feel like they can fully bring themselves to their work.

Here, we still have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to build inclusive communities where students can thrive. Ultimately, if we want to produce great science, we need to recruit and support great people.

And that means creating environments where everyone has the chance to succeed.

> *"Opportunity should be open to everyone, and our responsibility is to build environments where people from many backgrounds can succeed."*

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May 2026
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