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Minority-Serving Colleges Deserve More Respect



By *Marybeth Gasman* | OCTOBER 11, 2009

If we want the United States to be globally competitive and to meet our moral obligations to one another as citizens, we must focus on educational equity for members of minorities and help them get college degrees.

Aside from being the right thing to do, it's practical: The Census Bureau projects that the percentage of people of color in this country—that is, the nonwhite population—will increase from the current 31 percent to 52 percent by the year 2050.

True, undergraduate enrollment of students of color has increased in recent decades. For example, between 1984 and 2004, enrollment increased from 1.9 million to 4.7 million—an impressive rate of 146 percent. That said, increased enrollment of students of color is not enough to close the higher-education gap in the United States; those students must go on to complete their degrees. Recently President Obama, along with several major foundations (including the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Bill &

Melinda Gates Foundation) set goals for increased postsecondary attainment by all Americans. Obama wants every individual to have at least one year of higher education by the year 2020. To meet that goal, we must place greater emphasis not only on enrolling more students of color but also on graduating them.

Over the past 20 years, the number of institutions serving minorities, including historically black colleges and universities, tribal colleges, and colleges serving Hispanic students, has grown by 200 percent. They will play a crucial role in meeting Obama's goal.

Among students of color, graduation rates, too, have increased over the past few decades, but not evenly among racial and ethnic groups. Latinos account for 7.5 percent of all bachelor's degrees but make up 15 percent of the nation's population; African-Americans account for 9.3 percent of all bachelor's degrees but constitute 13.5 percent of the population; and Native Americans earn only 0.7 percent of bachelor's degrees but represent 1.5 percent of the population.

Shortly after the Civil War, missionaries, philanthropists, and formerly enslaved African-Americans founded historically black colleges and universities (HBCU's). Tribal colleges emerged from Native American activism during the late 1960s and the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act of 1975. On the other hand, colleges that now serve predominantly Hispanic students were established as mainstream institutions (with three exceptions), but became Hispanic-serving as a result of shifts and growth in the Latino population. (The federal government defines a Hispanic-serving institution as having a full-time enrollment that is at least 25 percent Hispanic, with no less than 50 percent of its students qualifying for need-based aid.)

Too often, conversations about colleges and universities serving minorities are negative and lack nuance. Uninformed critics or journalists chasing a provocative story tend to generalize based on the wrongdoing of one or two institutions. Although healthy criticism is crucial, it is also important that those in higher education and across the nation are aware of the strengths of institutions serving minorities, and specifically what they can teach all colleges and universities about educating students of color.

These minority-serving institutions educate more than 2.3 million students, or 13 percent of all college students, with the vast majority of them students of color. HBCU's represent only 3 percent of all colleges and universities, yet they enroll 16 percent of African-American students at the undergraduate level; tribal colleges account for less than 1 percent of higher-education institutions but enroll 19 percent

of Native American students; and Hispanic-serving colleges make up a mere 4 percent of colleges and universities but enroll an impressive 42 percent of all Latino students in the United States.

All of those institutions serve a disproportionate percentage of low-income students, with 98 percent of African-Americans and Native Americans who are enrolled at HBCU's and tribal colleges qualifying for need-based federal aid. And nearly half of all students enrolled at minority-serving institutions receive Pell Grants, compared with only 31 percent of all college students. (At the same time, tuition rates at minority-serving institutions are an average of 50 percent less than at mainstream institutions.)

Students at minority-serving institutions are more likely than their counterparts at historically white institutions to be academically underprepared for college and to come from high-poverty, high-stress areas. In addition, nearly 50 percent of all students of color are the first in their families to attend college, compared with 35 percent of students attending mainstream institutions. Because minority-serving institutions enroll so many first-generation students, they are crucial pathways to opportunity for these students and their families.

It takes considerable time and effort for those institutions to graduate students that many mainstream colleges overlook or turn away for fear that their *U.S. News & World Report* rankings will tumble.

Minority-serving institutions empower, support, and challenge their students to fully participate in American society, in many cases making up for deficiencies in primary and secondary schools.

Moreover, these colleges serve as role models for all institutions in terms of their ability to increase students' self-esteem and strengthen their cultural identities. For example, Northwest Indian College, in Washington State, boasts a commitment "to the belief that self-awareness is the foundation necessary to achieve confidence, esteem, and a true sense of pride."

These institutions are able to have this kind of impact because they offer curricula and extracurricular programs that are culturally rich and culturally sensitive. And they promote same-race leaders and role models for their students in both the curriculum and student life. All colleges and universities should emulate the respect for diversity and diverse ways of learning so evident at minority-serving institutions. Feeling welcomed, respected, and worthy of an education leads to a positive experience for any student.

Also important, these institutions have long been incubators for leaders, especially in the educational and nonprofit worlds, and more recently in corporate America. They also perform immense amounts of public service in their communities and were doing so long before "service learning" or "civic engagement"

became buzzwords on mainstream campuses. These minority-serving institutions continue to achieve their successes despite limited financial resources and the all-too-prevalent belief, often tinged with racism and elitism, that they are somehow less capable than mainstream colleges are.

Many examples illustrate the dedication of minority-serving institutions to the success of their students. In particular they excel in preparing students for careers in science, technology, engineering, and math. For example, historically black colleges and universities award 50 percent of all the degrees held by African-Americans in math and 33 percent of the bachelor's degrees held by African-American women in the sciences, even though the institutions represent only 3 percent of the nation's colleges and universities.

Prairie View A&M University, for instance, offers high-school-to-college bridge programs, conferences highlighting student research, enhanced research opportunities with faculty members, and myriad campuswide, hands-on activities related to science, technology, engineering, and math.

Minority-serving institutions are also the largest producer of teachers of color. They educate nearly 50 percent of all African-American and Latino teachers, and also graduate 12 percent of Native Americans who pursue degrees in teacher education. These teachers are prepared with a devotion to cultural understanding and a keen awareness of diverse learning styles. For example, teacher-education students at National Hispanic University, in San Jose, Calif., learn in a bilingual environment that assures their comfort working in "culturally and linguistically diverse schools."

One of the most noteworthy achievements of minority-serving colleges is their role in encouraging students to pursue additional higher education. For instance, 56 percent of graduates of two-year tribal colleges continue their education at four-year institutions.

Colleges serving students of color recognize the potential in their students and provide them with the tools to succeed. We should not only look to them for ways to successfully educate students of color, but also invest in them financially and intellectually to meet our nation's higher-education goals.

One way to make an investment is for the public and private sectors to create incentives—in the form of salary supplements or forgiveness of student loans—to encourage young people to teach at minority-serving institutions after completing their Ph.D.'s. Fresh and innovative teaching leads to increased graduation rates. Another way is to direct money toward infrastructure in areas such as the physical plant, fund raising, and technology, since a solid infrastructure leads to increased degree attainment.

Minority-serving institutions are doing the lion's share of the work when it comes to educating our students of color. They should be applauded for and supported in their efforts.

Marybeth Gasman is an associate professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. She is the lead editor of "Understanding Minority-Serving Institutions" (State University of New York Press, 2008) and the author of "Envisioning Black Colleges: A History of the United Negro College Fund" (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).