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## Eye on MSI

Bethany Stotts, May 14, 2010

Discussing President Obama's **goal** that America would "once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world," an Education Department official recently argued that increased funding for minority-serving institutions—and historically-black colleges and universities, in particular—was the key to increasing the number of American graduates.

"We are going to educate our way back to greatness by the year 2020 and as a nation we know we can't do that without MSIs, minority-serving institutions, and HBCUs," argued John S. Wilson, executive director of the White House Initiative on HBCUs at the April 22 Education Sector event.

The reconciliation bill that passed Congress earlier this year allocated \$2.5 billion over ten years to MSIs, **reported** Paul Basken on April 4. "Of that sum, \$1-billion will go to pay for facilities and programs to help Hispanic students who major in math or the sciences at community colleges transfer to four-year institutions," reports Basken. "And \$850-million will go to historically black colleges, which can spend it largely at their discretion."

At the forum, Deborah Santiago, the Vice President for Policy and Research at **Excelencia in Education** said that she had reporters and other people ask her "well why, why should we give them [Hispanics] a hand out?"

"So, [I was like], we are having a great conversation and handout, whoa!" she exclaimed.

"Um, and for me it's looking at it, if you think of it as [a] handout you're looking at it the wrong way and again this speaks to how we frame this and talking about these institutions and it's not that it's a hand out," she argued. She continued,

*"In many ways, if you're thinking about higher education as a private good, you might think of it as a handout but if you're taking the approach that this is investment in our human capital, whether you're incentivized by social justice or by enlightened self-interest that one out of every two youth that are paying your social security are gonna be brown, whatever it is that is gonna get you to compel to work, those are the kinds of things we have to do a better job of showing" (emphasis added).*

The Department of Education website **lists** over 100 HBCUs in the United States, including both two- and four-year colleges such as **Stillman College, Bishop State Community College, Howard University, Florida A&M University,** and **Albany State University.**

Wilson, speakin at the forum, argued that the 2020 goal pulls historically-black colleges and universities (HBCUs) "toward a new HBCU narrative" which "requires us, HBCUs, to be more futuristic" and forces a "perspective change" that moves "us" past the "grievance narrative." He said,

"Now that's a significant change, it's a posture change, it's a perspective change and we believe it sets up a new conversation that *pulls HBCUs beyond the grievance narrative, okay, so that the basis for our insistence on more support from public and private sources gets us beyond civil rights, it gets us beyond affirmative action, it gets us*

*beyond diversity, it gets us beyond reparations, it gets us beyond grievance* and as I say the 2020 goal enables us to shift from plaintiff to partner, alright, that's a significant, that's a significant change" (emphasis added).

Wilson said that "HBCUs enroll 1.2% of all students," and "...11% of all African American students in higher education, yet they graduate roughly 24% of the African Americans who earn undergraduate degrees."

The National Science Foundation found in 2002 that in 2000, 25.7% of male African Americans graduating with a bachelor's degree in the sciences had their degrees conferred by HBCUs. This number grows to 34.0% when restricted to the "natural sciences" (excluding social sciences like psychology).

In 2000 HBCU's also conferred 27.1% of the bachelors degrees in the sciences awarded to African-American women. This number grows to 40.2% for African-American women when restricted to the natural sciences. In other words, four out of every six African American women earning a bachelors degree in a natural science field in 2000 had their degree conferred by an HBCU.

The Thurgood Marshall College Fund (TMCf), which **surveyed** its 47 "member public HBCU" schools, found in its 2009 report that, "The average percent of first-time full-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students in Fall 2005 returning in 2006 was 63%." (This number would not include non-degree-seeking students at community colleges who chose not to return.)

However, there was a wide variation in retention among the TMCf-surveyed institutions. For example, they report, "Howard University retained 85% of their students follow by Florida A&M University at 81% and Albany State University at 80%..." whereas **Langston University** retained "under half of their students."

As for part-time students, the retention rate was an average 43% among the 33 institutions surveyed, but others fare better or far worse:

"Charles R. Drew University of Medicine, Alcorn State University, Fort Valley State University and Virginia State University reported a 100% retention rate for part-time students from [the] 2005-2006 school year, while Central State University only retained 16% and Southern University and A&M College [retained] 11%."

According to Basken, "To meet broad policy goals, such as the president' college-completion benchmark, the government might consider giving more money to students of any income level and at any college, who demonstrate the greatest likelihood of completing a degree, Mr. [Richard] Vedder [director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity] says."

"Doing so, [Vedder] argues, would stand a better chance of significantly improving the nation's record on graduation than increasing spending, as the student-loan legislation does, on low-income students through Pell Grants and on low-performing minority-oriented colleges."

*Bethany Stotts is a staff writer at **Accuracy in Academia**.*