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White House Adviser Urges Historically Black Colleges to Change How They Are Seen

By Eric Kelderman

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Historically black colleges are a vital part of the nation's higher-education landscape, but they need to change how they are perceived to highlight the positive work they are doing, said John S. Wilson Jr., executive director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

That means the colleges must not be seen only as "plaintiffs" in the struggle for civil rights but also as "partners" in reaching President Barack Obama's goal of having the highest proportion of students graduating from college in the world by 2020, Mr. Wilson said. He added that his office is working to collect better data on the successes and challenges of student retention and graduation at historically black colleges.

Mr. Wilson spoke on a panel Thursday focused on what people across higher education can learn from the experiences and efforts to improve student achievement at minority-serving institutions. The event was hosted by Education Sector, a nonprofit group based in Washington.

The Obama administration has shown its commitment to minority-serving institutions, supporting the inclusion of \$2.5-billion for those colleges in the student-loan legislation the president signed last month, Mr. Wilson said.

"Many minority-serving institutions are doing great but unheralded work and are worthy of more investment," he said after the meeting.

Valerie P. Wilson, associate provost and director of institutional diversity at Brown University, joined other speakers at Thursday's event in emphasizing that even top research universities with much smaller proportions of minority students have much to learn by forming partnerships with minority-serving colleges. Brown, in fact, has a nearly 50-year partnership with Tougaloo College, a private, four-year historically black institution in Jackson, Miss.

The partnership provides faculty and student exchanges and collaborative research projects, and administrators from the institutions meet regularly to plan projects that benefit both. For example, Brown and Tougaloo students from a wide variety of majors have been able to gain valuable insight studying at Tougaloo's archive of civil-rights materials. Another program gives Brown graduate students an opportunity to teach in their field at Tougaloo for one or two semesters, providing them the experience of working in a different cultural and academic setting and making them better prepared for the job market, Ms. Wilson said.

Demographic Shifts

Minority-serving colleges represent what the future demographic of the nation's students and work force will look like, said **Deborah A. Santiago**, vice president for policy and research at Excelencia in Education, a nonprofit organization that promotes education policies to improve the academic success of Latino students. So minority-serving institutions' practices and experiences will be important to all of higher education as the number of minority students continues to increase and the student bodies of all kinds of colleges diversify.

Institutions that serve mostly minority students are better at understanding the challenges of those groups and can tailor programs to fulfill those needs, she said, such as mentoring and advising programs that work with individuals or small groups to keep students on track.

Charles N. Smith, vice president for student affairs at South Carolina State University, said that if all institutions don't do a better job of keeping minority students in college to graduate, they could end up unemployed or in the welfare system.

His institution is one of many in the state seeking to encourage more black males to stay in college and become teachers, a profession that has far fewer men than women.

Even with the programs that are in place, minority-serving institutions face numerous challenges to helping their students succeed, speakers said. One major problem is that a large share of minority college students come from low-income households and are the first in their family to attend college. But minority-serving colleges tend to be less-wealthy institutions without large endowments to spend on financial aid, and their dropout rates are higher than at other institutions.

The increase in the Pell Grant, approved as part of the new student-loan law, will help keep more of those students in college, Mr. Wilson said.

Another challenge is that there needs to be more research-based evidence on which programs work and which don't, the panelists said.

"Insufficient data has been the bane of my existence," Mr. Wilson said, adding that it is a problem his office is "aggressively trying to fix."