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# Universities Are Challenged as Demographics Shift

By REEVE HAMILTON and JON MARCUS

In August, 60 years after the [University of Texas](#) admitted its first black student, the school welcomed the first freshman class in which white students were in the minority.

White students, who accounted for 51 percent of U.T.'s freshman class in 2009, made up 48 percent in 2010. Black and Hispanic students represented about 5 percent and 23 percent, respectively, with Asians and other races making up the rest.

The state's flagship university passed the demographic milestone earlier than some had anticipated, reflecting a similar shift that is rapidly taking place at other top-level educational institutions across the country.

Although the changing demographics of college campuses may be grabbing the headlines, the more compelling issue is how the growing number of minority students presents serious social and academic challenges for financially strapped universities, even as the schools are under pressure to boost graduation rates.

Nationally, 52 percent of Hispanic students and 58 percent of black students are unable to earn a bachelor's degree in six years, compared with 40 percent of white students, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

"What is increasingly evident now that wasn't evident 10 or 20 years ago is the extent to which this is a national phenomenon," said Steve Murdock, a sociology professor at [Rice University](#) and previously the state demographer of Texas and head of the [United States Census Bureau](#). "This is not a Texas issue. It's not a California issue. It's a national issue."

For the United States to maintain — let alone grow — a college-educated work force, Mr. Murdock said, those graduation numbers will have to change.

Stan Jones, former Indiana commissioner of higher education and the current president of Complete College America, a national nonprofit group dedicated to boosting the number of college graduates, said the numbers have been telling the story for years. "But it hasn't

necessarily gotten through to policy-makers that this was going on, and clearly not to the general public," Mr. Jones said. "All of us are seeing it happening faster than we had expected."

For example, although their birth rate is growing at a significant clip, Mr. Jones said, Hispanics do not graduate from high school, go on to college or graduate in the same numbers as white students. "If you look at the freshman class everywhere in this country, it is more representative than it's ever been," he said. "But in four years, if you look at the graduating class, it is not going to be representative of the country, because many of those students from the underrepresented groups won't make it to graduation."

Educators give several reasons for the disparity, including economic differences, the comparative quality of college preparation at urban, rural and suburban schools, and a sense of isolation among those who are the first in their families to go to college.

"These are terrific students," said William Powers Jr., president of U.T. "Often, they may have gone to a high school where they didn't have a calculus class or [Advanced Placement classes](#). The challenges are also financial and what I call cultural. They might be away from home, and they don't have parents and aunts and uncles who have already been here."

In 2007, recognizing the demographic shift — and its accompanying challenges — U.T. set up a Division of Diversity and Community Engagement. With an annual budget of \$30.4 million, it encourages minority high school students to apply to college and then supports them with a complex framework of programs that include tutoring and personal advising.

"The question is, can we get them the support to help them over the gaps?" said Gregory J. Vincent, vice president of diversity and community engagement.

The results, so far, have been promising. Generally, students in the division's programs have grade point averages and retention rates as good as or better than the average in their respective classes. "The good news is that our students come highly motivated, so our challenges aren't as great as you'd expect, despite assumptions some people might make about their backgrounds," said Aileen Bumphus, executive director of the Gateway Program, an initiative under the Diversity and Community Engagement umbrella that works with about 300 first-generation students in each class.

Such programs have been crucial for students like Oscar Ayala, a U.T. senior from Houston who majors in biomedical engineering. Both of his parents are from Mexico, and neither attended college. "When it came time in high school to get ready for college, I didn't know what that meant," Mr. Ayala said.

But that success may prove difficult to maintain, depending in large part on decisions the Texas

Legislature will make this year to confront a budget shortfall that could reach \$20 billion or more. About \$5 million of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement budget comes from state money. Educators are particularly worried about cuts to the state's largest financial aid program, which primarily serves minority students.

Robert S. Nelsen, president of the University of Texas-Pan American, a South Texas institution that is 89 percent Hispanic, said cuts to the aid program would be "devastating" to the area.

U.T.'s main campus is not immune from the tension caused by economic constraints. In November, a faculty panel proposed deep cuts to the ethnic studies programs, including the John L. Warfield Center for African and African American Students, the Center for Asian American Studies and the Center for Mexican American Studies. Once the panel's recommendations were made public, about 150 students and faculty members protested, many accusing the administration of racism. University administrators have since said the proposed cuts will be scaled back.

But the incident highlighted the fact that increased diversity does not necessarily mean increased harmony or interaction on a campus where you can see a statue of Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president, not far from new memorials to Mexican-American labor leader César Chávez and [Barbara Jordan](#), the first black woman elected to Congress from the South.

Kacie Sebek, a senior from Houston, who is white, said she has seen classmates from predominantly white hometowns appear uncomfortable. "You have someone closed off in their own neighborhood, and suddenly they're in a world where people are different," she said.

Mr. Ayala, who was surprised by the dearth of Hispanics in his engineering programs, said students gravitate toward those with similar backgrounds. "As I started realizing who hangs out with who, I see that it's not as diversified as it could be," he said. "But I know it can keep moving forward."

Still, most U.T. students hardly noticed the demographic milestone reached by the current freshman class. "If you want to take sort of a benchmark of how we've progressed over 20 years, it would be that this went more unrecognized than you might have expected it to," said Mr. Powers, the university's president. "That, in itself, is a milestone."

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