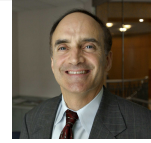




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## As COVID Made Getting a Degree Harder, Universities Failed to Enroll Minorities; Major Media Fails to Cover



Robert Weiner

By Bob Weiner and Adjanni Ramos

Since April, print-news outlets and TV cable networks have covered topics ranging from the Derek Chauvin trial to President Joe Biden's and the Republican infrastructure plans, among other subjects. They have failed to mention, even briefly, the fact that state-funded flagship universities are neglecting to attract and accept black and Hispanic high-school graduates. As the pandemic lightens across the country and the promise of the return to normal nears, flagship universities seem to ignore high-school graduates from low-income, working-class families.

A flagship university -- like Penn State-- is often the most recognizable and famous university in its state. They are typically state/public colleges since they receive state support and often carry the state's name with them. A lifeline for students from low-income families, flagship universities are often the last remaining option for a chance at higher education. But a recent report on college admissions by the *Hechinger Report* and *The Washington Post* revealed that lower-income minorities aren't being accepted into their state's flagship university.

Pennsylvania State University, or Penn-State, is one of the biggest and most recognizable universities in the country. But Penn-State also has the second-highest tuition cost among flagship universities nationwide, at \$35,068 per year. In 2019, the percentage of black high school graduates in Pennsylvania was roughly 15%, but the

percentage of Pennsylvanian black high school graduates enrolled into a freshman year at Penn-State was around 6%.

In 25 different states, public universities are failing to accept black and Hispanic students into their freshman body. The report revealed that the number of black and Hispanic students being accepted into their state's flagship university is proportionally less than the state's population of black and Hispanic students, at a drastic percentage.

In 2019, in states like Georgia (38%), Alabama (34%), Delaware (31%), and Mississippi (49%) - to name a few - the percentage of graduating black high-school students was above 30% of the state's black population. But the percent of enrollments into the states flagship colleges for freshman year was at 10% or below for all four states. The numbers were different for Hispanic students, who have higher populations in states like California, where the percentage of Hispanic students graduating high school was over 90% of high-school graduates, but less than 20% were accepted into the state's flagship university.

In states like Virginia, where blacks and Hispanics make up roughly 34% of the state's population, only three out of fifteen Virginia public colleges have a black and Hispanic student population that matches the state's population. But many flagships have also found that most students don't apply to them, usually for financial reasons.

Previous to the pandemic, a September 2019 study from the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) found that only six out of fifty flagship universities met the affordability benchmark that is expected from a state college. The same study found that the average students need over \$80,000 to complete a four-year education at many of the fifty flagships'; outrages for a flagship college.

A pandemic study published by IHEP in May 2021 found that 24% of students suffered from connectivity and context-access issues, while an additional 4% couldn't connect to the internet at all. The cost of attending a state-flagship university is already high. Add the cost of high-speed internet, which most low-income families already

struggle to meet, and one can see how students feel like it's not worth acquiring a degree amidst a pandemic, let alone outside one.

But as disappointing as it to find out that flagship universities are failing at fulfilling their purpose at attracting low-income students to enroll, it's even more disappointing to see that news networks are failing to cover or even report on the fact. Newspapers like *The Washington Post* have exclusively covered the issue, but little to no networks outside of that have talked about it.

During a June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021, interview with Anderson Cooper, former President Barack Obama criticized FOX News for ignoring major economic issues and concentrating their air-time on less important, exacerbated issues, like critical-race theory. He said, "I also think that there are certain right-wing media venues... that monetize and capitalize on stoking the fear and resentment of a white population that is witnessing a changing America and seeing demographic changes."

In his book *Why Universities are not Businesses*, Dietmar Bräunig writes "Universities are economic institutions, but they are not businesses. Unlike businesses, they provide lecture and research services as public goods to enhance welfare." This logic is the reason why flagship universities are supposed to run off state-funding so that students can afford to attend an academic lecture at a relatively low cost. But instead, flagships are charging tuition rates above the median income of most low-income Americans, for information that is taught nationwide at different academic centers.

Federal allocation of funds, based on demographic fairness, can help universities attract more enrollments and increase the number of grants they give. The university can also change its messaging, making it clear that local flagships are an option and talking up diversity groups, clubs, and student organizations. But it's not entirely the university's fault, however, since students are consistently encouraged to go to the best university for the degree they are seeking. So it's not surprising that students feel inclined to search for knowledge somewhere else. Since news outlets failed to cover it, it's as if the problem was never real.

*Robert Weiner was a spokesman in the Clinton and George W. Bush White Houses. He was Communications Director of the House Government Operations Committee, and Senior Aide to Four-Star Gen/Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey and Reps. John Conyers, Charles Rangel, Claude Pepper, and Ed Koch. Adjanni Ramos is a Policy and Research Analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change.*