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As Louisiana lags nation in African-American college enrollment, schools look for ways to recruit the underserved

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BY MARK BALLARD | MBALLARD@THEADVOCATE.COM
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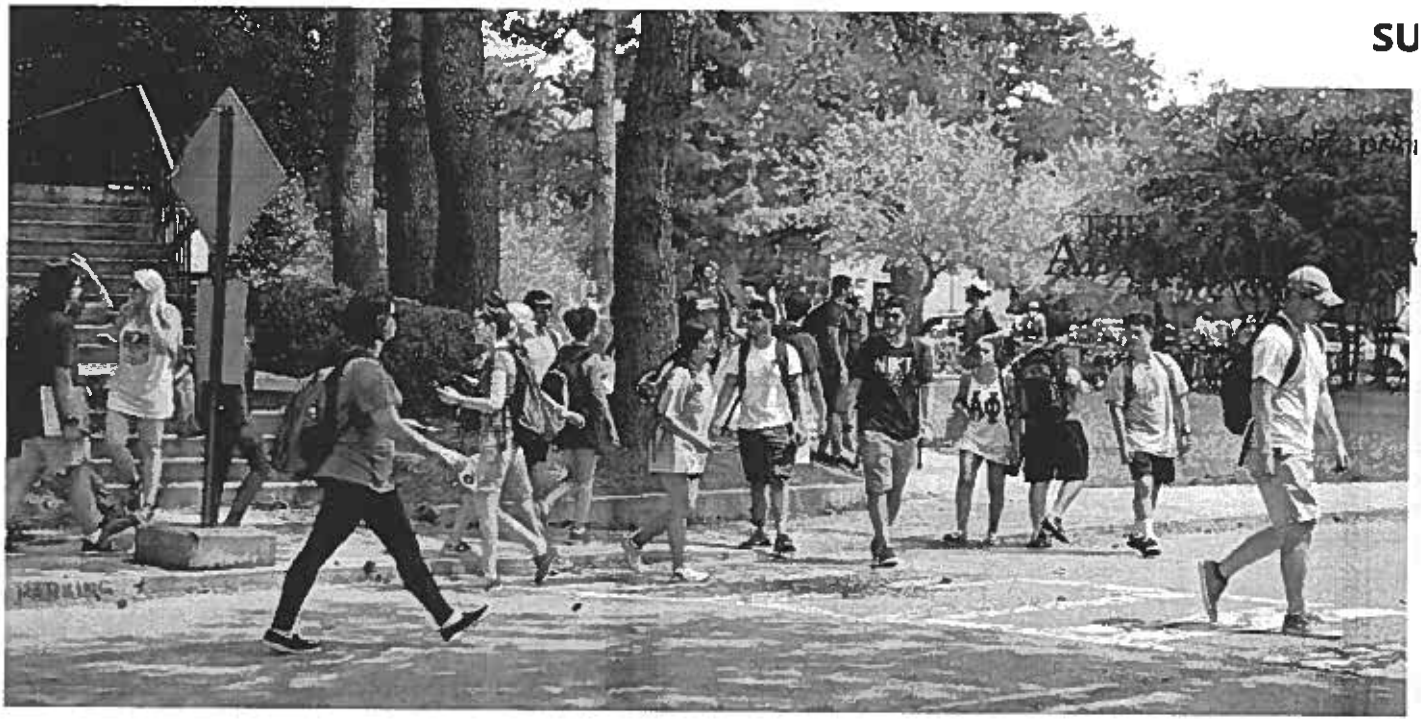

LSU's Baton Rouge campus
The Advocate file photo

Mark Ballard

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Jim Henderson, the head of the University of Louisiana System, recalls sitting down with higher education leaders a few years ago to try and figure out why the Bossier Parish Community College wasn't attracting students.

It was a brand new campus in an area of the state that was undergoing an economic boom. Students should have been flocking through the doors.

"And I noticed that everyone at the table looked like me: gray hair, white, and professional" education administrators, Henderson said. "That was the clue."

The group decided to add people of color and professionals with different backgrounds, to help set policies and develop procedures for enrollment, outreach and retention of students from populations that historically have been underserved.

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It worked and within a few years BPCC was one of the fastest growing colleges in the country.

Bringing in minorities who once were legally forbidden from attending most of the state's public colleges just a few decades ago requires more than just wishing it so, said Henderson, who oversees the largest of the state's four university systems with nine four-year institutions with about 91,000 students spread across the state.

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"It has been a long journey for this state. And it's still difficult to have conversations about race," Henderson said. "But for us to compete nationally, we've got to find ways to reach populations that have been historically underserved."

He ticks off on his fingers standards recently implemented in the college system that educates almost half the state's college students: Campuses need to be welcoming and safe. A curriculum needs to lead to employment. Students need to see people who look like them in the classrooms, as fellow

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students, as faculty, as mentors, as advisors, as administrators. People of different races and backgrounds need to talk.

It's not an "affirmative action" style goal with set numbers to achieve, Henderson said. Rather, the colleges and university leaders are focusing their efforts on raising access to the universities by visiting potential students in high schools, working earlier to match students with curricula that fits their wants with the job market's needs; then using mentoring, tutoring and counseling to help enrolled students succeed.

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Henderson is not the only system leader talking about the need to bring more African Americans into the traditionally white and better-funded public colleges and universities. LSU President F. King Alexander uses every opportunity to talk about increasing minority enrollments in freshmen classes and in the student body as a whole at the state's premiere public academic institution. "We're bucking the trend nationally," he has said repeatedly.

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The numbers show some slow progress, but Louisiana still lags way behind the rest of the country enrolling and retaining African-American students.

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The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education, released a study Monday that showed many of the nation's flagship universities enrolled disproportionately few African-American students. Despite recent gains, LSU still has one of the nation's largest disparities.

In raw numbers, despite recent efforts, none of the Louisiana four-year colleges have done a particularly good job – with the exception of the historically black Southern University and Grambling State University – of enrolling and retaining African-American students.

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Statewide, 15 percent of the students are black in majority white public colleges and universities, according to Board of Regents statistics. When including the historically black universities, African Americans account for 27 percent of the state's student body in the 2016 fall semester.

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Nationally, blacks make up 34.9 percent of the student body. African Americans account for about 32 percent of Louisiana's population.

In 1994, African Americans accounted for 12.1 percent of the students at those same four-year institutions.

Interestingly, more blacks were in college 14 years ago than are today – 33,345 students in 1994 and 29,026 in the fall semester of 2016, according to the Board of Regents. Part of the reason could be the decrease in the enrollments at Grambling and Southern over the past decade.

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"It takes more than successful recruiting, that's the access part. The success part is more crucial and is more vulnerable to budget cuts," said Joseph Rallo, the state's commissioner of higher education.

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Individual institutions have many programs available. One, for instance, identifies African American males who might make good school teachers, sets them up with mentors, helps them navigate the curricula, and offers aid.

But these programs require resources that the state's unstable budget situation undermines. "Student affairs offices and guidance counselors are the first to go when university budgets are cut," Rallo said.

On a visceral level, the state's public colleges and universities are paid for by all the state's taxpayers should be open to all the state's residents.

On a practical level, research shows that people with post-secondary degrees earn more over their lifetime, contributing taxes and spending

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to the local economy.

Until 1963, when the law changed, the only publicly funded four-year institutions open to African-Americans were basically Southern and Grambling State.

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Southwestern Louisiana Institute of Liberal and Technical Learning, which eventually became the University of Louisiana Lafayette admitted African-American students soon after the U.S. Supreme Court's Brown v Board of Education decision in 1954, becoming the first institution in the Deep South to do so. Otherwise, the four-year institutions in the UL System and LSU campuses were off limits until 1963. But passing a law was only the first step.

Years of legal wrangling followed over how to desegregate Louisiana's college campuses.

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In the late 1980s, state Attorney General Billy Guste argued that Louisiana schools were still pretty much racially segregated – but by the students' personal choices, not by state law. He asked the U.S. Supreme Court to halt the court-ordered merger of the college systems under a single management board, the mandating of admission standards and the quality review of academic programs.

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Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Patrick Higginbotham, a Republican from Houston, noted in 1988 that the "long years of separatism have worn deep traces" in Deep South colleges and universities that states should fix.

Bringing minority students onto majority campuses has not proven an easy fit.

While 90 percent of the white students have never experienced discomfort on campus due to comments about their race, 68 percent of the black students have, according to 2017 LSU "Campus Climate Survey."

Frederick Bell, a Greensburg junior, was walking into the student section of LSU Tiger Stadium for a football game last year when he was asked if he was a butler.

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It wasn't so much the effrontery of the comment, Bell recalls, but that he was one of only a handful of blacks in an alcohol-fueled crowd where someone felt safe enough make such a remark.

"You feel, physically feel, the possibility of violence in situations like that," said Bell, who is in the honors college at LSU. He doesn't go to the many bars off campus, a common social past time among many white students, and most of his friends are other African-Americans.

"Students here go into their own bubbles with people who think like them, act like them," Bell said. "That's not to say they're all haters, they're not, but they believe what they believe."

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He, however, gives LSU administrators high marks for putting a focus on diversity.

Still, overcoming a history of discrimination is difficult.

Cassini Williams, who is attending Baton Rouge Community College, was offended last week when a chemistry professor, who in lesson about pigmentation, told the class what he called a Chinese proverb about why the earth had so many different races. God was making batches of humans, the story goes, and found that the dark-skinned ones weren't good enough, so he tried again.

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"I don't think he was intentionally being hateful," Williams said. "The problem is that he didn't have a clue how hateful, how offensive, his story actually was to people who look like me."

BRCC Interim Dean Laura Younger for the school's Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Division, was brought into the situation. She wouldn't talk about the specifics, but said generally the administration develops a personalized professional improvement plan for the faculty member that involves meetings,

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perhaps additional training and close observation. She calls the plan "a professional improvement to pedagogy and to mke them sensitive to the diversity."

The other public colleges follow a similar course of action.

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In her experience on the LSU campus, Briana Fleetwood, a senior from Atlanta, finds less overt racism, particularly when compared to her native Georgia, and more misguided comments that stem from whites and blacks not understanding each other's worlds.

"I think people don't understand certain aspects of my culture and I definitely don't understand aspects of theirs," she said. "I've sometimes been a little afraid to ask. Is there is something that I truly don't understand? I would hate to be disrespectful and not know it."

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"Why is diversity is important?" Commissioner Rallo asked. "It forces you to think about other people's points of views. It allows you to engage with people that you didn't grow up with and at the end of day it makes you a better citizen, a better person. And the campus is where it starts."

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1994

Percentage of African-American undergraduates enrolled in state's public four-year universities in Fall 1994 was 12.1 percent

When HBCUs are included the total is 27.04 percent.

33,345 African-American students total enrolled in Louisiana, including HBCUs.

The national average in 1994 was 27.7 percent

LSU had 1,653 blacks or 8.28 percent

Southeastern Louisiana University had 935 black students or 7.41 percent

University of Louisiana Lafayette had 2,990 black students or 19.5 percent

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University of New Orleans had 1,808 black students for 15.49 percent

2016

Percentage of African-American undergraduates enrolled in state's public four-year universities in Fall 2016 was 15 percent.

When HBCUs are included the total is 24.07 percent.

29,026 African-American students total enrolled in Louisiana, including HBCUs.

The national average was 34.9 percent

LSU had 3,252 blacks or 12.3 percent

Southeastern Louisiana University had 2,360 black students or 17.31 percent

University of Louisiana Lafayette had 3,210 black students or 19.8 percent

University of New Orleans had 1,022 black students for 15.86 percent

Source: Board of Regents

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