

College grad rate between whites, minorities narrows

By Katherine Mangan, Chronicle of Higher Education

The graduation gap between minority and white college students is slowly narrowing, and the campuses having the most success aren't necessarily the wealthiest or most selective, according to a new report by the Education Trust.

"Colleges that decide student success is the No. 1 priority have been able to move the needle even with decreasing levels of state support," the report's author, Joseph Yeado, a higher-education research and policy analyst for the Education Trust, said Wednesday.

But "while the trends are moving in the right direction at the national level," he said, "they're moving at far too slow a pace."

The report, based on data from the U.S. Department of Education, notes that, from 2009 to 2011, the number of Hispanic undergraduates at four-year colleges shot up 22 percent, while enrollment grew 8.5 percent for black students and 2.7 percent for white students. Six-year graduation rates for all three groups improved: by 4.7 percent for Hispanic students and by 2 percent for black and white students.

Gaps remained, though. Graduation rates for Hispanic students were 11.1 percentage points below those of white students, while the gap between black and white students was 22.2 percentage points.

Michael Dannenberg, director of higher-education and education-finance policy for the Education Trust, said student demographics don't have to dictate outcomes.

“What individual colleges do often can make all the difference in the world between a student graduating or leaving with a pile of debt and no degree,” he said in a written statement. “Demography is not destiny, and what colleges do matters.”

The report singles out the colleges it considers leaders and laggards in closing graduation gaps.

Among those with the most impressive gains, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro saw graduation rates for black students jump to 60.1 percent in 2011 from 52.3 percent in 2010. Graduation rates for black students have been equal to or higher than the rates for white students for more than a decade, the report notes.

In an interview, David H. Perrin, provost and executive vice chancellor at Greensboro, cited the campus’s “culture of nurturing and support for students,” including extensive tutoring and help with writing and computer literacy. Minority students also benefit, he said, from learning communities that bring students together to study topics like sustainable entrepreneurship or to help them zero in on majors.

The report also singles out the State University of New York at Stony Brook, where Hispanic students graduate at a slightly higher rate than their white classmates. The rate for Hispanic students jumped to 66.5 percent in 2011 from 58.1 percent in 2010.

Among the colleges that the report says show “disturbingly large gaps in graduation rates” are the University of Akron, where it says the rate for white students climbed to 43.4 percent in 2011 while the rate for black students fell to 9.8 percent.

Akron’s chief diversity officer, Lee Gill, said in an e-mail on Wednesday that the graduation rate for black students climbed to 16.9 percent in 2012 and that the university had “completely revamped our enrollment strategy, strengthened our

mentoring and advising programs, and significantly expanded our learning communities (with their proven strategies of increasing African-American graduation rates).”

At Michigan State University, the percentage of white students graduating in 2011 grew to 80.9 percent, while the percentages of black and Hispanic students graduating dropped to 55.4 percent and 61.5 percent respectively, according to the report.

A spokesman for Michigan State said in an e-mail on Wednesday that the university’s graduation rates are “consistently higher than would be predicted based on our students’ demographic data” but that it remains committed to raising success rates for all students.

The report points out, however, that colleges with similar demographics can have starkly different outcomes on closing graduation gaps. Success, it says, “isn’t predicated on tonier demographics or more selective admission standards.”