

Grade Point

Students to Education Dept.: Small changes can make big payoffs in graduation rates

By **Nick Anderson** March 22 at 9:50 AM

Sometimes it pays for Washington officials to hear directly from the kinds of students they want to help. About a dozen students and recent graduates from minority-serving colleges visited the Education Department in Washington late last week to tell about their experiences and what they think helps and doesn't help in the quest to get a college diploma. Among them were African Americans, native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos and first-generation immigrants.

Catheryne Lee Mora, a biology major at Miami Dade College, told Education Secretary John King that she had a stop-and-start journey through high school and into college one year after a death in the family and the loss of her family home. She had to drop out of school and go to work. But eventually she went to night school to get her high school diploma, and she was grateful for the guidance she received. "They did flips and turns, at the college and the high school, for that to happen," she told King.

Syeda Raza, a Pakistani-born student, was a high school valedictorian. But her dreams of going to Northwestern University were derailed after she learned that her status as an undocumented immigrant would prevent her from getting the financial aid she needed to afford the elite private school. "It was kind of devastating," she told King.

Raza later enrolled at the public University of Illinois at Chicago and received interim immigration help through the Obama administration program known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA. She is majoring in neuroscience and will be graduating soon. Raza recommended that colleges have liaisons trained to help undocumented students.

King, who won Senate confirmation last week to serve as the department's head through the end of President Obama's term, was eager to hear from the students about specific problems and solutions they encountered. "What are your colleges doing well?" he asked. And what are they not doing well?

Many talked about the bewildering complexity of financial aid.

"I didn't know where to look for scholarships," one said. "The only way I knew how to continue was to apply for loans."

Another said that as a first-generation college student, getting her parents to find their tax forms and focus on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, was challenging. “So much added stress,” she said.

Whitney Sawney of the University of Arkansas suggested that high schools should have courses in financial aid so students know “how to navigate the system.”

Imhotep Simba, a recent graduate of Coppin State University, said that the perception among many disadvantaged students is that grants and scholarships are very competitive, which forces them to turn to loans to stay in college. (Often, though, grants are available for those who fill out the FAFSA.) Simba also strongly recommended that colleges build more dormitories to help students become grounded in the academic community. Often, he said, commuter students face challenges in connecting with their school.

Alysse Dowdy, of the University of Virginia, said that figuring out the Common Application to apply to colleges was somewhat daunting, but she was lucky to find an English teacher who guided her through the process.

Jorge Gonzalez, of the University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley, said that his college excelled at bringing families into the college community, a key step to help parents understand what it takes to complete college.

Mora said that one of the most important things a college can do to help boost graduation rates is to bolster the confidence of students who face constant pressure to justify why they are in school instead of getting a job. “You need to make us believe that we belong,” she said. “It’s very easy to give up.”

Federal data shows that 59 percent of first-time, full-time college students obtain their bachelor’s degree within six years. Large numbers don’t finish, especially those who are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or whose parents did not attend college. But these students who met with King for an hour on Friday afternoon seemed optimistic that steps can be taken, large and small, to erase those barriers.

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