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EDUCATION

Massachusetts college presidents discuss campus inclusion efforts



Lawrence Bacow, president of Harvard University (top right); Gilda Barabino, president of Olin College (middle left); Robert Brown, president of Boston University (middle right); Pam Eddinger, president of Bunker Hill Community College (bottom left); and Paula Johnson, president of... more
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By Hilary Burns
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During a discussion among college presidents in Greater Boston, Bunker Hill Community College President Pam Eddinger did not mince words in pointing out the sector's shortcomings when it comes to serving its economically disadvantaged students.

The moment was not without context, given the other panelists' roles at some of the most competitive colleges and universities in the country.

“We keep trying to teach our students how to navigate (our institutions),” said Eddinger, speaking by video conference. “Our goal should be to change the system. There's nothing wrong with our students. They're navigating a system that is completely unfamiliar.”

The higher education sector has become increasingly diverse over the past decade. The number of Black and Hispanic students enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities grew 32% to 2.9 million students between 2010 and 2019. But research indicates the sector's diversity challenges extend well beyond race, as low-income students often struggle to adapt to college life and the culture shock when they arrive on campus.

While schools have made progress in drawing a more diverse student to their campuses, just getting them there is not enough, Eddinger said.

That was among the highlights from the April 14 panel discussion on the future of education. The event was hosted by *The Boston Business Journal* and featured college presidents from some of the most prominent schools in Massachusetts, let alone the country. Participants included Harvard University President Lawrence Bacow; Olin College President Gilda Barabino; Wellesley College President Paula Johnson; and Boston University President Robert Brown.

Among the events other key takeaways:

All schools are hurting from the pandemic, but community colleges are *really* hurting.

Eddinger pointed out that Bunker Hill Community College saw its enrollment drop 15% last fall due to hardships created by the pandemic. Nationally, community colleges reported a 10% decline in enrollment last fall and if those students don't return, the higher-education system could lose a generation of low-income and disadvantaged students – many who aspire to transfer to private, four-year schools.

She said about 65% of Bunker Hill students are Pell Grant eligible – and Eddinger would like to increase that statistic to 80% or 90%. Coaching services and peer mentoring are required to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds stay on course, she said.

“Our greatest fear is that these students would go away and it's not like our traditional students who would come back in a year after a gap year,” Eddinger said. “There's no concept of gap years at community colleges. I was afraid that they wouldn't come back. So, a lot of our efforts has been trying to locate these students to keep them connected to keep that belonging the sense of belonging intact.”

Higher ed's elite are listening.

Harvard's Bacow said the university “has done a lot better but still has a long ways to go” when it comes to easing the transition for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The nation's oldest college has added orientation programs for first-year students of color as well as students from lower-income backgrounds, Bacow said. Harvard also has donor who was a first-generation student who provides students with \$1,000 per semester in spending money because he remembers not being able to afford things like going to eat off campus with friends when he was a student, Bacow said.

“I think students who actually come to Harvard suffer more from the imposter syndrome than they might at other places, so there's that as well,” Bacow said. “I think naming the problem helps and that's why Tony's book is so helpful because students can understand that they're not alone and (administrators) also understand the challenges that we need to face. We're also fortunately blessed to have resources that other institutions candidly lack.”

Schools are investing in support systems.

Boston University's Brown noted the importance of environments where all students feel welcome and safe on campus such as centers for first-generation students. Brown said that about 20% of BU's students are Pell Grant recipients and 20% are first-generation students.

“We're big so those are large numbers, but they get diffused out in the larger population,” Brown said. “What we've learned over time is putting resources out where they can go in and out of those communities where they have shared experiences. Those experiences are very, very important to their sense of belonging in the institution.”

Equity also extends to gender, and not just race or socio-economics.

Olin's Barabino said every entering class at the engineering school just west of Boston is half male and half female. Barabino, who became the college's first Black leader last summer, emphasized that efforts to increase racial and ethnic diversity also have been key to the school's fabric since its founding in 1997.

“Students are coming into a program where it's designed to be student centered and that contributes to a student's sense of identity, belonging and purpose,” she said. “Students are co-creators (for) team-based, hands-on learning. There's something about this structure that is very attractive to those from underserved and underrepresented groups. So that sense of community actually does make a huge difference as to who feels like part of the institution.”

Academics and curriculum must be part of any effective efforts in support of diversity.

Wellesley's Johnson said the all-women college prioritizes the methods and materials used in the classroom to help further its diversity efforts.

“What is it that we can do differently in the classroom, particularly in areas and fields that have not necessarily been embraced by either gender or by race or ethnicity,” Johnson said. “I think that is a journey that we've been on that I think is has been showing some real benefits.”

Eddinger reminded them of the impact that they can have on low-income students by visiting their schools and

reminding them that selective, four-year institutions are welcoming to students like them.

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