



Rethinking Racial Classifications

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By

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An Education Department plan to change the way colleges collect and report data on their students' racial and ethnic backgrounds is attracting growing criticism.

Opposition is coming from a group that represents some of the most elite private colleges in the country -- as well as from officials of large, diverse public universities. Among the concerns being raised is that the plan will treat Hispanic students differently from other groups, that new approaches to counting students of multiple races and ethnicities could result in the false appearance that some colleges are less diverse than they are, and that the plan would be confusing and inconsistent. Among education groups, those that focus on Hispanic issues are more likely to favor the proposal, but some predict that the new system would appear to depress Hispanic enrollments as well.

When the Education Department's plan was released in August, many educators assumed that it was largely a done deal, and that the department had relatively little ability to change its approach. But as time has passed, more have become convinced that the department can and should alter the guidance for colleges. Officially, the department is saying only that it is considering comments it has received, and that most of those comments are favorable. But the department has also been holding meetings with some critics -- some of them members of Congress -- and some people familiar with those discussions said privately that they believed real changes were a possibility.

The debate is the latest twist in a process that dates to 1997, when the White House Office of Management and Budget released directives to all federal agencies about how to update the way they collect certain demographic data. Many educators and advocates for minority students have said for years that the current system doesn't reflect the realities of the way many students view themselves. Under the current system, students must check a single box -- something that many people of mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds find uncomfortable or insensitive. (The current system relates to federal reporting; many colleges have already started using different systems to reflect changing demographics.)

The system proposed by the department in August would do the following:

Colleges would ask students first if they are Latino or Hispanic, with just a yes/no answer. Then the second question would provide a choice of races: American Indian, Asian, African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or white. Because Latino students identify with multiple racial groups (or none), their total numbers would be clear by the first question, but they would not be restricted in how they want to identify themselves. Students would be able to check multiple boxes in answering the second question and all who checked more than one would be reported as "two or more races," not in the boxes that they checked.

One of the key areas of disagreement is whether the two-question format (one focused on Hispanic status and one on any status) is an improvement. Critics note that there may have been a need for such a format when the department was forcing students to pick a single box, but question why it would be needed when that requirement is disappearing.

C. Anthony Broh, director of research policy for the Consortium on Financing Higher Education, a group of 31 elite private colleges, sent a detailed letter to the department with numerous objections to the two-question system. He said that there is no evidence that this approach yields more accurate information and that research from the National Academy of Sciences has found that a two-question format is particularly confusing to the younger Hispanic population -- the group that would be filling out these forms.

Broh also raised more philosophical objections. He noted that under the system proposed by the Education Department, someone who identified as Hispanic and black would be assured that the Hispanic part of her identity counted (in the answer to the first question). But someone who identified as Native American and white, for example, would turn up in the two or more category, with no indication that someone with Native American identity existed at the college. (In fact, one concern of many college officials is that because so many Native American students do not have exclusively Native American grandparents, many institutions could see their Native American enrollment figures -- already small -- disappear into the mixed background category. And a Native American student looking for colleges with at least a 1 percent population of people from that background might rule out institutions that have many students proud of and engaged in their heritage, but who suddenly wouldn't count in some official way.)

Why, Broh asked, is it fair for some minority populations to be decimated (in a statistical sense) but not others? "Philosophically, this format says, 'we care more if you indicate that you are Hispanic than if you indicate you are black or American Indian, etc.' " he wrote to the department. "Separating the identities of Hispanics from other groups is a visual statement that groups are not treated equally in higher education."

The institutions that belong to COFHE, Broh's organization, include Ivy League universities and top liberal arts colleges, many of them in the Northeast. But his analysis is largely shared by experts on student demographics who deal with very different populations.

The California State University System, for example, which has a large and growing Latino population, doesn't want to use the two-question format either. Marsha Hirano-Nakanishi, assistant vice chancellor for academic research and resources for the system, said two questions aren't needed and that there is no evidence that asking the racial/ethnic identity question once isn't the best system. She said that the system devised by the Education Department "might have been fine for the Department of Commerce" in its data gathering, but that education is different, in that information is collected from students, who need straightforward instructions that also give them appropriate choices that reflect their identities.

And that leads to another major criticism. The draft guidance was created in part to reflect the reality that many students don't have an identity that fits neatly into one box. But many educators argue that when students find out that they are going into a "two or more" category, they are having their identity robbed because they are made generic in terms of ethnicity.

Hirano-Nakanishi doesn't want to be forced by the department to report on students in that way. She wants to first ask students what their race and ethnicity is, giving them the option of checking multiple boxes. Then she wants to ask students if they have a preference of being identified in a particular way. So a student with a strong ethnic or racial identity can answer the first question completely but also show up statistically in the way that reflects that person's actual life. Hirano-Nakanishi is totally fine with reporting some students as being from mixed backgrounds -- if that's what they want -- but she noted that many students do not want that.

"We want to respect the individual," she said. "If you bother to ask them what they are, and then ignore them, it seems less respectful."

Other colleges want the right to continue to use a system called "trumping" for reporting students of multiple races and ethnicities. This system assigns people to an individual category in various ways. Some colleges trump "small," so the group with the smallest population counts the mixed-background student. Others trump "black," meaning that students who are part black count as black -- a system that may be used by colleges facing scrutiny over their ability to attract black students.

Broh says that colleges should be able to trump -- as many have done in the past for their own reporting -- in a way appropriate to their institutional needs, provided that they make whatever system they use public. (Broh also favors giving students an open response question so that they could describe themselves, and those answers might trump other trumping assumptions.)

Some Hispanic groups have liked parts of the system proposed by the Education Department. Officials with both the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities and *Excelencia* in Education said that they did not think that the two-question system was problematic. Deborah A. Santiago, vice president for policy and research at *Excelencia*, said that combining Hispanic status with racial issues can confuse some Latino students

because "for many this is an ethnicity issue and not a race issue." She added that she did not understand why others were "making such a big issue" of these concerns.

But anger about the proposed system is so strong that even the Mavin Foundation -- a group that is an advocate for people of multiple ethnicities and that had been pushing the Education Department to abandon its traditional "pick one box" approach -- has come out against the department's plan. Mavin signed on to a joint letter with other civil rights groups expressing "deep concern" about the proposal.

Numerous other groups are also calling on the department to rethink its approach.

The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, for example, has released a report suggesting that the new system would make it "extremely difficult, and sometimes impossible, to conduct meaningful research or monitor civil rights compliance and educational accountability for students by race and ethnicity."

A spokesman for the Education Department said that officials there were not yet ready to issue final guidelines, but suggested that the department isn't ready to back away from its draft yet, either. The spokesman said that more than 170 responses have been sent to the department, with the "greatest number" coming from those who "strongly supported" the proposal to allow students to pick more than one race. (While many of the critics object to how the department would do that, they do not object to the idea of letting students do so, and generally applaud that.)

The spokesman added that none of those who did raise objections had raised "any issues that were not thoroughly addressed in the 1990s" when OMB took up the issue of updating data collection on race and ethnicity. "There were a handful of organizations (some representing other organizations) who took a negative view of the proposed guidance," the spokesman said. "They mostly re-introduced issues addressed and decided by OMB a decade ago."

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