
Today's News

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Scholars Urge Colleges to Retain Data on Race That New Federal Rules Would Blur

By [DAVID GLENN](#)

Seattle

Colleges should continue to collect detailed data on their students' racial and ethnic identities, notwithstanding new federal guidelines that will categorize many students simply as "two or more races," two scholars urged on Wednesday at the annual conference of the Association for Institutional Research.

The new federal rules, which were debated over several years and made final in guidance released last October, have weighed on the minds of scholars attending the conference here this week. Beginning in the 2010-11 academic year, colleges will be required to collect and report racial and ethnic data to the U.S. Department of Education according to a specified format or risk losing eligibility for federal student loans. At many institutions, the transition to the new system will entail drastic changes in application forms and databases.

During Wednesday's session, C. Anthony Broh, director of research policy at the Consortium on Financing Higher Education, and Stephen D. Minicucci, the consortium's director of analytic studies, offered a model for collecting racial and ethnic data that they said would minimize disruption and maintain continuity with colleges' existing records. Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci have developed their system in collaboration with staff members at the Common Application and the College Board, but those organizations have not yet made firm commitments to use the system.

Mr. Broh was sharply critical of the new federal rules but said that colleges had to come to terms with them. "We lost that battle," he said. "Our purpose here today is not to gripe but rather to move on. We're going to try to make lemonade out of lemons."

The central complaint raised by Mr. Broh and others has to do with the new rules' treatment of students who mark more than one racial category. Under the new federal guidelines, colleges must report those students to the government as belonging to "two or more races," with no further detail given. But that framework, Mr. Broh said, will not allow colleges to keep adequate track of historically underrepresented minorities. A student who is African-American and American Indian belongs to groups that have historically been ill-served by higher education; a student who is white and Asian does not necessarily fit the same profile.

A second frequent complaint is that the new federal guidelines unreasonably privilege "Latino" identities. Under the new rules, when colleges collect data about race and ethnicity, they must use a "two-question" format like the one recently used by the U.S. Census Bureau. In the first question, students will be asked if they are of Hispanic or Latino background. In the second question, students who are not Latino will be asked to categorize themselves in one or more racial categories: American Indian, Asian, Black or African-American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, white, or two or more races. In colleges' reports to the government, a Latino identity must always trump all others, because Latino students do not answer the second question.

Racial and Ethnic Subgroups

In a paper that they distributed at Wednesday's session, Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci write that the two-question format "amounts to a visual statement that groups are not treated equally in higher-education policy."

The new federal guidelines do permit colleges to collect and analyze additional data for their own purposes. Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci's mission on Wednesday was to persuade institutional researchers to take advantage of that flexibility.

Their first recommendation was that colleges should continue to ask Latino students to answer the second question, about racial identity, even though the official federal reports will always regard those students simply as "Latino." Second, Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci urged colleges to ask about membership in racial and ethnic subgroups. (The new federal rules permit colleges to do this as long as the subgroups "roll up" into one of the major federal categories.)

For example, if a student reports on an online application that she is Asian, the Web site could offer a drop-down menu that asks, "Which best describes your background?" with options including Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Pakistani, Filipino, Vietnamese, Other East Asian, Other Indian Subcontinent, and Other Southeast Asian.

Finally, and most controversially, Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci offered a strategy for colleges to maintain internal data about students who fall into more than one racial category. These groups must be reported to the federal government simply as "two or more races," but Mr. Broh said that colleges should internally class them as belonging to one race or another.

"I'm not saying that there isn't such a thing as a multiracial identity in the United States," Mr. Broh said. But for purposes of redressing historic injustices and maintaining continuity with existing data, he said, it is worthwhile to force the students into a particular classification.

For students who are Asian and white, Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci recommend that they be internally classed as Asian to maintain data about a salient minority identity. For the same reason, the scholars recommend that students who are African-American and white be classed as African-American.

Sensitive Questions

Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci offered roughly a dozen other similar "decision rules," two of which were sensitive enough that they prompted questions from the audience.

First, they recommended that students who are Latino and black be internally classified as black—in other words, the opposite of the new federal policy. That decision, they said, was based on a survey of admissions officers' existing practices. To maintain continuity with colleges' present data, they said, the practice should be continued. But at least one audience member said that important information about Afro-Caribbean students might be lost under that method and that admissions offices might be interested in giving a falsely high impression of the number of African-American students at their institutions.

The second thorny recommendation was that students who are American Indian and white be classified as white. Mr. Broh said that the consortium's research suggests that some students claim a partial American Indian identity on flimsy grounds and that students who report being white and American Indian have, on average, a relatively high household income.

Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci ended with a side-by-side comparison between their system with and the new federal rules, using data from a 2007 survey of more than 100,000 students at the consortium's 31 colleges.

In the new official reports to the federal government, 4.7 percent of those consortium students would be classed as "two or more races." But under Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci's recommended system for internal record keeping,

only 0.8 percent of them would be classed as multiracial. (Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci's system allows students to count as multiracial if they report being members of three or more groups.)

In Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci's system, a sharply larger proportion of students are classified as black: 5.3 percent, as opposed to 4.1 percent under the new federal rules. And 15.8 percent of students in Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci's system are classed as Asian, but only 13.3 percent of students in the federal system are counted as Asian.

Those gains for the black and Asian categories come almost entirely at the expense of the "two or more races" slot. Most other categories are nearly equal in the two systems: 6.9 percent of the consortium students are counted as Latino in Mr. Broh's system, while 7.1 percent of them are classed as Latino under the new federal rules. White students are 60.5 percent of the total under Mr. Broh's system and 59.9 percent under the federal rules.

Members of the audience seemed broadly sympathetic to Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci's model, but some asked whether it would be cumbersome for colleges to maintain, in effect, two sets of books—one for federal record keeping and one for internal purposes.

Mr. Broh acknowledged that challenge but said that the right database programming could make the system feasible. In any case, he said, most colleges will have to change their databases to accommodate the new federal rules.

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