

POST

## Md.'s Towson University conquers 'graduation gap'

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Towson University, a Maryland institution that has yet to produce a Nobel prize or a Rhodes Scholar, is gaining a national reputation for something else it doesn't have: a gap in graduation rates between whites and underrepresented minorities.

The suburban Baltimore school joins Virginia's George Mason University on a list of 11 higher education institutions nationwide where graduation rates for minority students meet or exceed those of whites, according to an [analysis](#) by the Education Trust, a Washington-based think tank that focuses on racial and ethnic achievement gaps.

It put Towson's graduation rate at 67 percent for white and black students and 70 percent for Hispanics. The report says the school has an overall graduation rate of 65 percent, higher than George Mason's 58 percent and the national rate of about 55 percent. (The overall rates include students who decline to identify themselves in a racial or ethnic group.)

"The goal has been, if you take them in, you should graduate them," said Robert Caret, Towson president since 2003.

Several recent reports have highlighted Towson's success at a time when closing graduation gaps has become a priority for the Obama administration. The president's [American Graduation Initiative](#) calls for the nation to regain the world lead in college completion by 2020.

Several mid-Atlantic institutions, including American and Old Dominion universities and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, have succeeded in closing the gap in graduation rates between white and black students. Others, including Virginia Tech and James Madison University, have closed the gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students, according to the Education Trust report, which calculated average graduation rates for 2006 through 2008. Towson and George Mason are unusual for having eliminated both divides.

Founded in 1865 as a teachers college open only to white students, Towson remains a provincial state school but is trying to shake its reputation as a second choice for students turned away from the flagship University of Maryland in College Park. Towson admits nearly two-thirds of its applicants.

In 10 years, according to school data, Towson has raised black graduation rates by 30 points and closed a 14-point gap between blacks and whites. University leaders credit a few simple strategies: admitting students with good grades from strong public high

schools, then tracking each student's progress with a network of mentors, counselors and welcome-to-college classes.

"Regardless of your background, there's people here for you who understand what you're going through," said Kenan Herbert, 23, an African American Towson senior from Brooklyn, N.Y.

Colleges once reported a single graduation rate for all students, a broad average that masked embarrassingly low success rates for blacks and Hispanics at some nationally ranked institutions.

That has changed in the past decade under a law requiring colleges to report minority graduation rates for the first time. Several recent studies have discovered wide gaps at some schools but little or no disparity at others, which proves that "the gaps are not inevitable," said Mamie Lynch, a researcher at Education Trust.

Nearly two-thirds of the nation's colleges have graduation rates of less than 50 percent for blacks; success rates for Hispanics are similar.

A 2008 study by Education Sector, another Washington-based think tank, found a black-white graduation gap of 19 points at the University of Michigan, 22 points at the University of Wisconsin and 24 points at the University of Colorado. The 2010 Education Trust report found gaps of 15 points or more separating Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites at flagship public universities in Illinois, Massachusetts and Nebraska, as well as Purdue.

Even schools at the top of the pecking order, including Harvard and Dartmouth, have modest but measurable gaps in minority completion, the Education Trust found, although minorities graduate at high rates.

Towson serves about 17,500 undergraduates, of whom 12 percent are black and 3 percent Hispanic.

Fifteen years ago, as a way to boost graduation rates, school leaders decided to emphasize high school grades as the dominant factor in admitting students. Internal research had convinced them that students who entered Towson with high GPAs tended to graduate, regardless of SAT scores, and that students with high test scores but low grades were more likely to drop out. (EEC: Northwestern publicly noted this 40 years ago and changed admissions standards--don't know if still true.)

The strategy relied partly on the strength of Maryland's public schools. Towson draws hundreds of minority students from suburban school systems in Baltimore, Montgomery, Anne Arundel and Howard counties, all known for rigor and strong minority achievement.

"We're getting high SATs and high GPAs from schools where high SATs and high GPAs mean something," Caret said.

Towson once ignored the struggling schools of Baltimore City. But in 2005, Caret guaranteed admission and a partial scholarship to all students from Baltimore city or county who finished in the top 10 percent of their high school class. In one year, the number of black freshmen from Baltimore rose from 34 to 98.

With growing ranks of minority and first-generation college students, Towson administrators set about building a network of initiatives to shepherd them through the difficult transition to college.

The heart of the effort is a program called SAGE, or Students Achieve Goals through Education. Each year, nearly 200 entering freshmen from disadvantaged backgrounds are paired with mentors. They connect over the summer. The mentorship lasts through the crucial first year.

Mentors are trained to practice what director Raft Woodus calls "intrusive caring": gently but firmly prying into every aspect of the freshman's life, probing for problems.

"You have to eat every day. You have to study," said Herbert, a mentor. "I make sure they do it. I do it with them."

Minorities and first-in-their-family college students are steered into another program, Support for Student Success. Initiated by Caret, it offers an 11-week overview of every resource available to Towson students, along with exercises in team-building and study skills. Classes are taught by trained counselors.

Mentorships and "College 101" courses are becoming common as universities work to raise minority graduation rates. But they are of varying quality.

"Some of them have good programs, some of them don't. They'll all say they do," said Kevin Carey, policy director at Education Sector. *(EEC: Amen to that.)*