As Duke and other universities work to diversify their doctoral programs, they know that creating a sense of belonging for people from underrepresented groups is crucial to their success. Minority-serving institutions have been doing just that for decades. Often laboring under tight budgets, they educate students who face many challenges. More than half of the students enrolled in these institutions receive Pell Grants, nearly half are the first in their family to attend college, and many struggle with inadequate academic preparation. Yet these colleges have had a significant impact.

Historically black colleges, for example, not only award a disproportionately high share of undergraduate degrees in science, math, and engineering among black students nationally, but they also produce more than one-third of the black graduates who go on to earn Ph.D.s in STEM fields.

How do minority-serving institutions produce this kind of results?

Marybeth Gasman, a professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania, and Clifton F. Conrad, a professor of higher education at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, began traveling the country in 2011 to find out. They visited historically black colleges, Hispanic-serving institutions, tribal colleges, and colleges that predominantly serve Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders.
Their goal was to glean ideas that could benefit the rest of higher education. Public schools in America are now majority-minority, Ms. Gasman notes. Are American colleges, used to teaching a more homogenous population, prepared for the changes ahead?

Her and Mr. Conrad’s book, *Educating a Diverse Nation: Lessons From Minority-Serving Institutions*, was published last year by Harvard University Press. Ms. Gasman, director of the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions, talked with *The Chronicle* about their findings. The following conversation has been edited and condensed.

Q. Why did you write this book?

A. We really wanted to understand more about what goes on at a minority-serving institution that might be a little different than majority institutions. We had a hunch that something was going on here.

Often what happens is that people from majority institutions go into minority-serving institutions and say, "This is how we do it." It’s always the majority institution telling the MSI this is how do you do it. Let’s flip that.

Q. What did you learn about how minority-serving institutions approach students?

A. One of the most important aspects of MSIs — and this is so simple, but it manifests in the most beautiful ways — is there’s an assumption that the students are going to be successful. That they should be on campus. There aren’t assumptions around whether or not the students should be there. It’s a yes.

**Diversifying the Pipeline to Professor**

Would changing the sink-or-swim culture of graduate school broaden the appeal of a Ph.D.? What can research universities learn from minority-serving institutions about helping minority graduate students succeed? Read more about efforts to diversify the faculty pipeline in this three-part package.

- To Diversify the Faculty, Start Here
- What Minority-Serving Institutions Can Teach Other Colleges
- How Minority Students' Experiences Differ: What Research Reveals

The students we talked to, over and over and over, with no exception, told us they knew the people in their institution believed in them even more than they believed in themselves. That was incredibly empowering. I think that makes a big difference.

Q. What do these colleges do particularly well?
A. They design a pathway for success. They have a wide array of programs put in place by faculty and staff that ensure students are successful. They’re not leaving it up to chance.

One of the things that always bothers me is we tend to have this knee-jerk reaction that when the student isn’t successful, we put it all on the student. I think it’s a combination of the institution should be doing better and the student should be doing better.

There’s also this attitude of your success is my success and my success is your success. The young men in the STEM programs at Morehouse College, for example — the way they help each other and challenge each other and really care for each other, it was almost dumbfounding for Cliff and me to witness. We had both taken science classes, and we had never experienced anything like this.

Q. What are some other ways in which minority-serving institutions stand apart?

A. Across the majority of institutions, we found that the students were engaged in culturally relevant problem-solving. So in a tribal college, they were solving problems relating to indigenous issues. At a black college, they were interested in economic empowerment in the local community. That helped establish their importance to the larger community, the larger region.

Another thing, and this is so important to institutions across the board, is that they encouraged students to explore and to grab ahold or seize their identity. They were never asked to check their identity at the door. They weren’t asked to become someone else. They weren’t asked to drop their cultural heritage.

A lot of times, students who go to majority institutions feel like they’re asked to assimilate and to not represent their cultural tradition. At these minority-serving institutions, students felt they that could be themselves and express themselves culturally and racially and ethnically. They didn’t feel like that was immediately erased or taken away from them.

Q. Do you think majority-white institutions could easily or effectively adopt these approaches?

A. I absolutely think they can adopt them. I think people have become very comfortable teaching a more homogeneous classroom, and now they have a more heterogeneous classroom, and they’re not necessarily sure how to serve and how to reach all the students. I definitely think it’s something that can be done. Anyone can design a pathway for success for students.
Another thing came up in every interview we did: People said, "This place is like a family. I know I can count on people. I know I have somewhere to go." No matter how big. That’s not necessarily how you hear students at majority institutions talk about college.

It’s not a coddling. It’s a challenging environment. It’s an environment that pushes students.

Q. How has researching this book influenced you?

A. It’s the reason why I opened up the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions. As an academic, you can get into this rut of me, me, me. I thought, What if instead of going that route, let’s go the other route? How can we give back? How can we create opportunities? How can we lift up the MSIs and make sure people see them as models? They’re not perfect; there’s lots of problems here and there. But there are some things that they’re really good at.

It also changed the way I teach my classes. This is my 16th year as a faculty member, and I decided to redo all of my classes last year. I took all I learned from MSIs and decided to use what I saw in my classes. The real interactive hands on-learning, where students are the very center of class, I learned that from MSIs.

Q. If colleges don’t learn how to better serve minority students, what’s likely to happen?

A. I think we’re going to have a lot more protests. I don’t think institutions will be able to get away with not addressing these kinds of issues. It was not that long ago I overheard at an event several faculty members saying, "These diversity issues, they don’t really matter that much in the classroom. We don’t need to be talking about that." Well, I don’t know how many faculty would make that statement right now, after the year we’ve had where students really, really pushed.

Beth McMurry writes about campus culture, among other things. Follow her on Twitter @bethmcmurtrie, or email her at beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

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