OSU diversity gains not at main campus

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Ohio State University has 8 percent fewer black students on its Columbus campus than it had in 2001. But regional campuses gained black students, resulting in a slight increase universitywide.

Officials are troubled by the trend in Columbus, where 2,695 black students were enrolled last fall.

“It’s disturbing to see that kind of drop-off,” said trustee Algenon L. Marbley, a U.S. District judge.

Selective colleges nationally have struggled to attract black students, experts say, but some Ohio schools have been able to increase their numbers.

Ohio State officials recently called the African-American numbers and lower-than-expected growth among Latino students “patterns that command attention.”

The Latino population has nearly doubled on all campuses since 2001, but these students still represent only about 3 percent of all Ohio State undergraduates. Black students make up 6.7 percent. About 12 percent of Ohioans are black, according to the 2010 census, and 3 percent are Latino.

Ohio State spokesman Jim Lynch noted that there are more black students across all campuses, despite the trend in Columbus.

“We’ve always said we don’t care where someone starts. What matters is that they get in and graduate,” Lynch said.

While the Columbus campus lost 227 black students since 2001, the regional campuses gained 462. That adds up to an 8 percent increase for the entire Ohio State system, to 3,339.

Campus officials blame the decline on the Columbus campus on a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 2003 that prohibits colleges and universities...
from using race as a chief factor in admission decisions. Ohio State stopped awarding admissions points based on race after the ruling, which eliminated a similar system used by the University of Michigan.

“The numbers started to dive after 2003, and we think it is a direct result of the University of Michigan ruling,” said Dolan Evanovich, vice president for strategic enrollment planning.

By comparison, Kent State and Miami universities both experienced a small drop in black students about the time of the ruling, but their numbers quickly rebounded. Ohio University’s numbers didn’t drop.

Although colleges have become slightly more reflective of the U.S. population, some groups are still underrepresented, said David Hawkins, director of public policy and research at the National Association for College Admission Counseling in Virginia.

In 2009, blacks and Latinos made up 34 percent of the traditional college-age population, Hawkins said. But they represented only about 27 percent of students enrolled in higher education.

Many underrepresented students either don’t get into colleges with rising admission criteria, such as Ohio State, or they don’t apply because they think they will be rejected, Hawkins said. “They just perceive that it is unattainable.”

Miami officials blamed their decrease on confusion about a tuition plan that was adopted in 2003. Ohio residents now pay the same tuition as out-of-state students but receive scholarships to reduce their out-of-pocket costs.

To increase its numbers, Miami created a 1 1/2-day program for minority and underrepresented students, increased recruiting in cities and created a scholarship for families earning less than $35,000 a year.

“From 2005 to 2010, we doubled our applications from Columbus-area high schools,” spokeswoman Claire Wagner said.

Ohio State also has increased spending on minority recruitment since the Supreme Court decision, and the black-enrollment numbers started to rise slowly universitywide.

Evanovich said it’s tougher for all types of students to get into the Columbus campus these days because the school’s standards have climbed. The regional campuses are open to all Ohio high-school graduates.

Anton Johnson, a 20-year-old health-science major, was surprised that fewer African-American students are attending the Columbus campus, but he expected growth at the regional campuses.

“Many of my own friends didn’t get into the Columbus campus, and I remember feeling pretty privileged when I did,” said the Westerville native, who helps lead prospective students on tours of the campus.

Johnson is black.
Ohio State has worked hard to help its minority students succeed in college.

A record number — 91 percent — of black students returned for their sophomore year last year — well above the national average of 85 percent. Similarly, 93 percent of Latino students came back for their second year, exceeding the national average of 86 percent.

Ohio State plans to hire three new recruiters and ask its existing 17 U.S. recruiters to increase their focus on getting more minority and poor students to apply. It is also working with inner-city schools across Ohio to prepare more underrepresented children for college.

“We now need to build a better urban pipeline of students who go to college,” Evanovich said.

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