

Nebraska Examiner

Omaha group aims criticism at UNO for racial inequities among students and faculty

University says the publicly funded institution is committed to inclusivity and better data collection

BY: **CINDY GONZALEZ** - NOVEMBER 29, 2023 5:45 AM



OMAHA — A local organization whose mission is to call out racial inequities has targeted the University of Nebraska at Omaha, urging its leadership to improve the underrepresentation of people of color on campus, at graduation and in faculty positions.

[MORE](#), which stands for Movement in Omaha for Racial Equity, analyzed public information to point out disparities the group said should alarm community leaders and state legislators.

“The data indicates there are problems, obviously, at UNO,” said Patrick Velasquez, primary author of the 25-page [report](#).

Troubling to him and MORE board chairman A’Jamal Byndon, they said, is that the publicly funded university was not “entirely transparent” in sharing information that can help measure student success.



UNO officials offered links to websites that contained “countless data elements” and did seem to monitor that data on a regular basis, said Velasquez, a UNO alumnus who has worked three decades in California’s higher education system. He also is a MORE board member.

Patrick Velasquez, Chair of MORE's Data/Research Committee and the report's primary author

A’Jamal Byndon, Chair of MORE's Board of Directors

“My premise is if you have an institution like UNO they should be right on top of these things,” said Velasquez. “I don’t see any structure for which they would be utilizing the data to inform what they do.”

Disparities across higher education

MORE has distributed the report to a few dozen University of Nebraska representatives, including the Board of Regents. They also met this summer with four UNO officials about the findings.

Those officials referred a reporter's questions to Brandon Bartling, director of media relations, who said UNO is committed to fostering inclusivity and continues to explore new ways to use data better to improve student success and faculty recruitment.

He said UNO's recruitment and outreach work extends into the community, where officials engage with leaders of underrepresented groups and participate in activities such as Juneteenth and Cinco de Mayo events.

"Disparities are a significant issue across higher education," Bartling said. "And while our work will not create change overnight, we have already seen promising results here at UNO."

Among concerns included in the report:

- "Unacceptably low" undergraduate enrollment of Blacks. While 12% of Omaha's population in 2021 was Black, only between 6% and 7% of UNO undergraduate enrollment was Black in the years from 2017 to 2021.
- "Especially low levels" of Latino representation in bachelor's degrees conferred — 4% in 2020-21. Meanwhile, that same year, the share of Latino undergraduate students at UNO was about 16%, on par with the city's Latino population.
- "Minuscule" Native American undergraduate enrollment. The low numbers hampered the ability to analyze outcomes such as graduation rates.
- Underrepresentation of Blacks, Native Americans and Latinos among UNO's faculty. The report said that in 2020 and 2021, for instance, UNO had four Black professors, the highest level of faculty, which MORE said represented 3% of the total number of full professors. There were four Latino full professors in 2020 and three in 2021 (not including assistant or associate professors).

Whites made up about 66% of the city in 2021 and were slightly underrepresented (62%) in overall undergraduate enrollment and slightly overrepresented in bachelor's degrees conferred.

Bartling did not dispute the report's findings.

'Do I belong?'

Velasquez said that years of research show that students perform better when they see role models and others from their own backgrounds on campus.

"If we don't have a critical mass of our students, that contributes to the marginalization, the sense of exclusion," Velasquez said. "Students start to wonder: What am I doing here? Do I belong?"

He lauded UNO for learning community programs such as the Goodrich Scholarship program, which provides financial assistance as well as support and mentoring outside the classroom.

Velasquez said UNO officials told MORE members during the meeting that they'd like to look more closely at the Goodrich program, [which recently reached its 50th year](#) at UNO, and perhaps "scale up."

MORE leaders say UNO is integral because of its geographic accessibility to Omaha's inner-city populations and communities. The group plans to examine other public education systems, too, and hold community forums on the findings.

Byndon said the city and state at large could benefit from better representation of racial and ethnic groups at Nebraska universities, as, he said, they are the source of growth in Nebraska's population.

"If we want to create a workforce that has allegiance to Nebraska, the best way to do that is to educate the local population," he said. "And that population has an increasing number of people of color."

Recommendations

Among recommendations in the MORE report:

- State lawmakers should demand, as a condition of public funding, that state institutions monitor access and success for underrepresented students and publish results annually. MORE's board includes one legislator, State Sen. Terrell McKinney of North Omaha.
- Create a plan that "places ethnic-racial diversity, equity and inclusion among the highest priorities" and contract with external consultants if necessary.
- Implement strategies to increase people of color in high administrative positions and faculty.
- UNO's chief diversity officer should report directly to the president, who also should have an advisory board that issues an annual report relating efforts and results.
- Create departments, similar to Black Studies, for other ethnic groups. Require at least one course in such an academic area to earn a bachelor's degree.

Bartling said UNO would take the recommendations under consideration.

In an email a month before MORE released its report in September, the chief of staff to UNO Chancellor Joanne Li told MORE that while UNO could not provide responses to all its questions, efforts are ongoing to improve diversity and equity. Keristiena Dodge said the campus goal under Li is to "enhance the social mobility" of students in part through workforce development, including paid internships.

Dodge said that UNO last year established the Division of Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success, which, she said, should improve capability to track student outcomes.

"... So it may take time for our efforts to be noticeable in our data," she wrote.

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