

# Student Debt Stifles Faculty Diversity

## *Comparing Debt Burdens in SREB's Doctoral Scholars Program and Nationwide*

Student debt is a serious issue in the United States, and one that disproportionately impacts students of color. As tuition costs have risen over the past decade, student debt accumulation has reached critical levels. Understanding how different student populations, particularly underrepresented students, experience debt burdens can help inform potential solutions to this issue.

The national student debt burden is currently more than \$1.5 trillion and continues to grow, a looming crisis in American higher education. Student loan debt exceeds car loans and even credit card debt. This debt accumulation has serious ripple effects that extend beyond higher education, as servicing this debt affects people's ability to buy houses, appliances and cars and make other substantial life decisions.

Beyond the eye-boggling dollar numbers in the headlines, however, it is important to dive deeper and understand how student debt has particularly impacted certain student groups. In particular, students of color tend to carry a heavier burden than their peers when it comes to student debt. Studies have found that African American and Hispanic students are about twice as likely to have student loan debt compared to their white peers.

A trickle-down effect of that imbalance is a less diverse faculty, and thus a wider discrepancy between faculty and student body demographics. This is because students who have already accumulated high levels of debt from their undergraduate education may be less likely to pursue graduate school. When thinking about the long-term effects of student debt, it is important to note that who decides to go to graduate school ultimately determines who joins the professoriate.

### **The SREB-State Doctoral Scholars Program Impact on Debt: A Survey**

Increasing faculty diversity is the mission of the SREB-State Doctoral Scholars Program. One strategy the program uses is addressing the financial burden of graduate school by providing financial support for participating students. In the summer of 2020, we surveyed our alumni to better understand the relationship between program participation and student debt burdens.

The questions were pulled from the National Science Foundation's *Survey of Earned Doctorates*, a census survey that is completed each year by all doctoral graduates in the country. While it should be noted that the two populations are not exactly equivalent, using the same questions allowed us to compare the results from the DSP and NSF surveys, providing insight into the impact of Doctoral Scholars Program participation on student debt burden. The following are some of the key findings.

*Doctoral Scholars Program participants were more likely than all students nationally to have large amounts of undergraduate debt.*

When asked about the amount of undergraduate student debt they had accumulated, 72% of all respondents to the NSF survey reported having no undergraduate debt while only 41% of Doctoral Scholar survey respondents said the same. In addition, while 11% of Doctoral Scholar survey respondents had \$50,000 or more in undergraduate debt, just 5% of NSF survey respondents reported debt at that level. These results align with research from the Center for American Progress indicating that students of color are more likely to take on undergraduate student debt, and in larger amounts, than their white peers.

*Doctoral Scholars Program participants were also more likely than students nationwide to report having graduate student loan debt.*

Despite the financial support that the program provides to students, some participants still needed to take out student loans to complete graduate school. When asked about the amount of graduate student debt they had accumulated, approximately 68% of all NSF survey respondents reported having no graduate student debt, while just 31% of Doctoral Scholar survey respondents said the same. In addition, nearly 47% of Doctoral Scholar survey respondents reported having \$20,000 or more in graduate student debt, compared to just 20% of NSF survey respondents. These results unfortunately align with research showing that, due to the racial wealth gap in America, students of color often face a lack of resources to pay for higher education and end up borrowing more than their peers.

*African American and American Indian or Alaskan Native Doctoral Scholars Program participants were less likely to have significant graduate debt than their similar peers nationally.*

When disaggregating the survey results by respondents' self-reported race and ethnicity, we see that some subgroups have different experiences than the population as a whole. Hispanic Doctoral Scholar respondents did not have more positive student debt outcomes than their national peers, but both African American and American Indian or Alaskan Native Doctoral Scholars Program participants saw interesting differentiation in their student debt burdens compared to their peers nationally. While 29.8% of African American NSF survey respondents reported having no graduate debt, slightly more African American Doctoral Scholar respondents (30.3%) reported having none. And African American Doctoral Scholar survey respondents who did have graduate student debt were less likely to have significant debt: just 16% reported \$90,000 or more, while 25% of African American NSF respondents reported the same.

American Indian or Alaskan Native Doctoral Scholar survey respondents reported lower levels of graduate debt as well. While 42% of this subgroup in the NSF survey reported having no graduate debt, 50% in the Doctoral Scholar survey did. American Indian or Alaskan Native Doctoral Scholars respondents were also less likely to have significant graduate debt, with just 13% reporting \$90,000 or more while 15% of NSF respondents from this subgroup said the same.

## Further work is needed to address the student debt crisis

Student debt has a serious impact on students' life trajectories — their career aspirations, graduate school attendance and level of future wealth. Currently, far too many underrepresented minority students shoulder a heavy burden of debt as they consider pursuing further education or entering the academy as faculty.

Programs that financially and professionally support underrepresented doctoral students, such as the SREB-State Doctoral Scholars Program, can provide one piece of the puzzle in helping to increase the number of Ph.D.s of color and ultimately increasing faculty diversity. However, these survey results show that even with the support of such programs further work is needed to decrease debt burdens for students of color. Systemic policy change — at the federal, state, and institutional levels — is needed to address the student debt crisis.

## Sources

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