

**LeMoyne-Owen College President Andrea Lewis Miller joined the presidents of Memphis institutions of higher learning and the head of Shelby County Schools on June 21, 2018 to discuss their institutions' roles in economic development.**

**The Commercial Appeal's education writer Jennifer Pignolet covered the forum. Her story is below.**

## **Top Shelby County education leaders see their role in economic development, closing racial wealth gap**

**[Jennifer Pignolet](#), Memphis Commercial Appeal** Published 4:32 p.m. CT June 21, 2018 | Updated 7:41 p.m. CT June 21, 2018

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More than 500 activists seeking a higher minimum wage rallied outside a McDonald's in Midtown Memphis. Jim Weber/The Commercial Appeal



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*(Photo: Jim Weber/The Commercial Appeal)*  
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The leaders of the six major education institutions in Shelby County pledged Thursday to lead the way on closing the racial wealth gap, from the opportunities they provide for students to the way they do business in the community.

The heads of Rhodes College, The University of Memphis, LeMoyné-Owen College, Southwest Tennessee Community College, Christian Brothers University and Shelby County Schools expressed a commitment to increasing opportunities for minorities and women in both education and economic development.

"I think that institutions can be leaders in helping push and make this economy better for everybody, and specifically for minority- and women-owned businesses," SCS Superintendent Dorsey Hopson said.

The leaders, in a panel discussion at the Midsouth Minority Business Council Continuum's annual forum, held at the Guest House at Graceland, touched on issues like their minimum wages, contracts and procurement processes and aligning their curriculums to the job market.

**More:** [Shelby County Schools plans to raise its minimum wage to \\$15 an hour](#)

It was a rare public sighting of the heads of the big five higher education leaders in Memphis all in one room together, and a chance to [highlight their recent trend of looking beyond their own walls](#) to partner with each other and the community.

"We have to be less insular," LeMoyne-Owen President Andrea Miller said.



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**November 15, 2017 - Dr. Andrea Miller, president of LeMoyne-Owen College, signs a letter of support for the Dream Act with other university presidents to Senators Bob Corker, Lamar Alexander, and David Kustoff during "The future of DACA, an analysis and panel discussion about the Dream Act" at the Halloran Centre on Wednesday. (Photo: Yalonda M. James/The Commercial Appeal)**

Education institutions — with budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars, contracts worth tens of millions and employment of thousands of people — have a rare three-pronged chance to affect change in their community.

The local leaders said they recognize that as a responsibility, and have made changes on both the education and business sides as a result.

SCS, Hopson noted, has raised its minimum wage, conducted a disparity study on the district's contracting practices and this week released its first plan to increase spending with businesses owned by minorities and women.



**Dorsey Hopson** (Photo: Shelby County Schools)

The district [raised its minimum wage to \\$15 this spring](#), increasing the pay for about 1,200 people from as little as a few cents to nearly \$5 more an hour.

"We think that's so important because we have so many people who work for us who have kids in our school system," he said. "And if they're struggling to keep the lights on, have to work a second job, can't spend the time at home, then that's certainly not supportive of student achievement."

The [median household income for white people in Shelby County](#) in 2016 was nearly \$70,000, while for African-Americans it was about \$36,000.

The district, [which has struggled to ready students for college](#) so they don't have to take remedial courses, is also [revamping its career and technical education efforts](#) to better reflect the job market. Instead of a student only studying cosmetology, he said, they should also receive business training on how to handle finances, manage a facility and recruit clients.



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**University of Memphis President David Rudd** *(Photo: Brad Vest/The Commercial Appeal)*

At the University of Memphis, President David Rudd said the district has typically spent about 3 percent of its dollars with companies owned by women and minorities. He's recently hired an external group to work with vendors to both identify those who could compete for bids and to help direct others toward resources to grow their businesses to be able to do work with the university. That work is starting this summer and fall, he said.

"We're two of the largest entities in the city and we ought to be more responsive," Rudd said of the university and SCS.

Despite local government entities trending toward a \$15 minimum wage, the [university recently raised its minimum wage from \\$10.10 to \\$10.60 an hour](#). About 40 people are paid that much. Rudd said during the budget process this month that he intends for it to go higher, but that to keep tuition low, it has to be done incrementally.

Keeping down costs for students, he said, is the best way to make a university education accessible to as many people as possible. The university also aims to employ its students on campus, including in [new call centers with FedEx](#), to give students both a way to earn money and entrepreneurial experience.



**March 10, 2016 - Tracy Hall, president of Southwest Tennessee Community College, speaks during the Frayser Exchange meeting at Union Grove Baptist Church Thursday. (Yalonda M. James/The Commercial Appeal) (Photo: Yalonda M. James)**

Employing students is also a goal of Southwest Tennessee Community College, President Tracy Hall said.

"Everything we stress is about getting a job," she said.

But students, she said, often don't know about opportunities available to them. In a city that serves as a logistics and transportation hub, students don't hear enough about high-tech jobs or chances to work at places like St. Jude.

"They are not as aware of those types of positions, because we talk about warehouse jobs," she said.



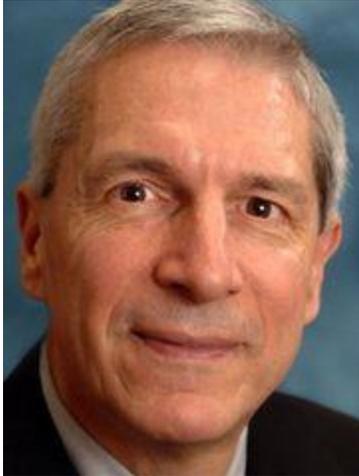
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January 13, 2018 - Dr. Marjorie Hass is now the twentieth president of Rhodes College. (Photo: Brad Vest/The Commercial Appeal)

Marjorie Hass, president of Rhodes College, said is also committed to "making significant headway on our minimum wage for our employees," but as the leader of a private institution, did not give specific numbers. A new procurement policy has also been approved, she said, that makes efforts toward increasing spending with firms owned by women and minorities.

Rhodes has significant partnerships with several major local companies, as well as SCS. That's a testament, she said, of the willingness of the other leaders to collaborate to provide internship opportunities for students.

"In many communities, the six of us wouldn't even know each other," she said.



**John Smarrelli**

John Smarrelli, the Christian Brothers president who also serves on charter school boards and advocates heavily for immigrant students, said colleges and universities can no longer be the "ivory tower" that never looks beyond its own campuses. They have to unite, have to talk to each other, and have to talk to businesses with needs so colleges and universities can align their programs to fit those needs.

"That's the only way things are going to get done," he said.

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(L-R) University of Memphis President M. David Rudd, Southwest Tennessee Community College President Tracy Hall, Shelby County Schools Supt. Dorsey Hopson, The MMBC Continuum President and CEO Jozelle Luster Booker, LOC President Andrea Lewis Miller, Rhodes College President Marjorie Hass, Christian Brothers University President John Smarrelli and Carol Johnson, regional executive director for program implementation for New Leaders, who served as forum facilitator.