President Obama shakes hands with guests after speaking at a White House reception for historically black colleges and universities on Monday.

By Eric Kelderman

Arlington, Va.
The presidents of some 70 historically black colleges, meeting here this week, started their day Monday with a trip to the White House to hear President Obama deliver a strong commitment to continued federal support for their institutions.

President Obama reminded them of the support his administration has already provided the institutions, through increased federal money and policies meant to help them become more financially stable.

"Strengthening your institutions isn't just a task for our advisory board or for the Department of Education; it's a job for the entire federal government. And I expect all agencies to support this mission," he said, according to a transcript of his remarks.

The federal government is putting $1-billion into grants to help minority-serving institutions improve in areas such as planning, management, endowments, or faculty development. In addition, the $40-billion increase in Pell Grant funds approved by Congress this year is expected to benefit a large number of minority students who come from lower-income families.

The private session with President Obama was part of an annual conference organized by the White
House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The president has declared this week Historically Black Colleges and Universities Week to coincide with the two-day conference, being held at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City Hotel here.

Charlie Nelms, chancellor of North Carolina Central University, said the president's remarks affirmed the role of minority-serving institutions as vital to helping the country attain the highest proportion of degree holders in the world—a benchmark President Obama wants the nation to reach by 2020. "It was a reiteration of the fact that in order to get to where we're trying to go in terms of degree attainment, we have to go through and with HBCU's, that we have a role to play, and that the larger higher-education community can learn something from us," Mr. Nelms said.

College leaders are also holding closed-door sessions with other top federal officials during the conference to discuss ways that the institutions can benefit by tapping into agency programs for assistance in various areas, such as earning research grants.

At the same time, administrators at black colleges are joining in discussions with their peers and higher-education experts about ways they can improve the management of their campuses through
more effective fund raising and attracting partnerships with private corporations.

John S. Wilson Jr., executive director of the White House initiative, has said he wants the conference to inspire college leaders to turn their campuses into "cathedrals" of higher education—institutions that can support excellence both in the physical and academic structures as well as create an atmosphere where students develop a positive moral and ethical character.

Irma McClaurin, president of Shaw University, said Mr. Wilson and the White House are taking the right steps. "We've been waiting a long time to get the support at the national level for historically black colleges and universities," she said. "They serve a very important purpose, and I think this vision ... is the direction that we need to go."