



Leadership Diversity: Is Recruiting on the Right Track?

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Leadership diversity has come a long way within higher education. There are more—and more prominent—people of color, women, gays and lesbians, and other unique and important administrators in our colleges and universities today. That’s the good news.

Statistics show that the leadership diversity momentum has slowed in recent years. In its “The American College President 2012” study, for instance, the American Council on Education found that the number of racial and ethnic minorities in presidential roles had actually dropped over the previous five years. As partners in the executive search firm Witt/Kieffer, we see positive data out there—women, for example, continue to make incremental gains in the administrative ranks—but on the whole, there is work to do. Colleges and universities are nowhere near the point at which academic leaders adequately reflect the constituencies they serve. This is not acceptable.

What is happening? Have colleges and universities given up on developing and recruiting diverse leaders? Have their priorities shifted—especially at many low- to mid-tier schools just trying to stay solvent and viable? Have search consultants like us insufficiently courted diverse candidates for top jobs? Are we all, collectively, failing?

We wouldn’t go that far. There are positive signs we see on the leadership development and recruiting fronts that are building blocks for the future:

- schools are more committed to diverse (and inclusive) leadership than ever before. The importance to mission, and the business case, are clearer and more accepted.
- more colleges and universities are cultivating diversity in lower ranks of leadership. They are appreciating the need to “grow” as opposed to “buy” diverse leadership, through a pipeline-oriented development approach (a trend explored by our colleagues Alice Miller and Jon

'78

The U.S. Department of Education is established.

'81

President Ronald Reagan signs Executive Order 12320 which creates the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities and encourages federal support for HBCUs.

'82

The Supreme Court rejects tax exemptions for private religious schools that discriminate. (*Bob Jones University v. U.S.*; *Goldboro Christian Schools v. U.S.*)

Derek Croteau in the latest issue of CUPA-HR's *Higher Education Workplace* magazine).

- leadership training programs catering to diverse academic professionals have proliferated.
- the chief diversity officer role, though still evolving, has grown in stature and responsibility.
- more than ever, recruiters covet diverse candidates (which, for obvious reasons, can be a double-edged sword).

Nuances in Recruiting Diverse Leaders

Recruiting is as much an art as a science, and recruiting diverse leaders presents additional wrinkles. First, it is

academic programs. This has seriously hampered their ability to advance.

Successful recruiting of diverse leaders requires the right community context. The most diverse communities were the first to recruit diverse leadership; less diverse communities are the last. So recruiting is also about educating the community on why it is important to recruit diverse candidates and how best to do it – from what to say to how to say it.

One good thing is that the definition of diversity is expanding, even in homogeneous communities. Inclusiveness is a key component, and search committees and organizations seem receptive to the idea that leadership candidates deserve fair and

of those who recruit them. They are fully aware that search committees demand that recruiters present a diverse candidate pool, meaning that individuals can be included in the initial mix though not considered serious contenders for the job. A diverse executive we know—one of the country's most prominent university administrators—refuses to put her name into the hat without a guarantee of being a finalist. The recruiter and client must demonstrate to her sincere interest from the outset and show consistent engagement throughout. She does not mean to be difficult but refuses to waste her time for the sake of “diversifying” the candidate pool.

In many instances, the jobs

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becoming increasingly competitive. All leadership recruiting is competitive, but diverse leaders are highly sought after. Compensation is often commensurate with demand, and qualified diverse candidates do not come cheap. Interestingly, the “diversity” aspect usually extends beyond the candidate to his or her entire household as well: Is it a diverse family? Will family members assimilate well into the community, schools, and local activities? In this way, recruiting is becoming more personalized.

Pipelines are thin. The population of diverse candidates in middle- to upper-level management positions and those poised for even greater leadership roles has been flat for many years, especially in STEM fields. Minority candidates, for instance, have been recruited into staff positions outside of management tracks, as well as into non-mainstream

balanced consideration regardless of color, gender, sexual orientation, age, nationality, and so forth.

Jaded Candidates?

While institutions and communities are becoming more attuned and receptive to diverse leaders, their overtures are often met with wariness. Diverse candidates are much more selective and savvy than in the past, less willing to move. Many have been burned by employers giving lip service to diversity but not backing up those promises. Strong candidates now seek assurance that senior leadership is truly committed to supporting diversity and inclusion initiatives. They want to know, up front, what resources will be made available to help them achieve their objectives.

Other candidates are guarded about the search process itself and the motives

presented to diverse candidates are unattractive, particularly the fundraising aspects. Philanthropy and philanthropic behavior have cultural differences and connotations. Some members of minority communities, for example, find the prospect of asking members of the majority community for money uncomfortable or even demeaning.

Thus, there is good and bad news and plenty of subtlety involved in furthering leadership diversity in higher education. We are not failing, certainly, nor are we succeeding beyond our wildest—or even modest—expectations. ●

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'86

Juliet García becomes the first female, Hispanic college president when she takes the helm of Texas Southmost College.

The Supreme Court declares that sexual harassment is a form of illegal job discrimination.

'90

Marguerite Ross Barnett is named president of the University of Houston, making her the first African American woman to lead a major university.