

Diversity Initiatives in Higher Education

By Lisa Rabb

There's no doubt diversity is a hot topic in academe. Nearly every college and university has adopted diversity or affirmative action plans. While progress has been made—from 1997-2007, the number of minorities employed in higher education increased 7%, according to the U.S. Department of Education—there continues to be room for improvement.

"Diversity is critical to the survival of an institution," says Ellyn Bartges*, Assistant Equal Opportunity Officer at Western Illinois University (WIU). "We're trying to educate our students to compete in a global society, and it's impossible to compete in a global society if you don't know what a global society looks like, or how to interact in a global society."

The racial diversity of WIU's employees has increased 8.5% since 2002, a fact that Bartges attributes in part to a series of programs the school created to increase employee diversity.

One program WIU uses to increase employee diversity is the Dissertation Fellowship. WIU created two fellow positions to bring people of color into departments where they were historically underrepresented. The fellows are paid to teach a class, participate in some of WIU's diversity initiatives, and still have time to work on their dissertations.

WIU also created a Dual Career Program to help increase diversity. "It's an attempt to try and recruit faculty and staff who bring diversity to a department in terms of gender, race, disability, sexual orientation—all of those things that are incorporated into our EO statement," says Bartges.

Another initiative created by WIU, the Visiting Scholar Program, is intended to help develop relationships with scholars from targeted underrepresented groups while they are in graduate school. An advanced-level Ph.D. student is brought on campus as a guest speaker, followed by a reception where he or she can interact with potential future colleagues on a professional level.

"It's a very accessible program, and a low-cost way to reach out to some upcoming faculty and make a connection," says Bartges.

To aid retention of employees, WIU instituted a Domestic Partner Benefits Program that allows employees and their domestic partners (both same sex and opposite sex) to purchase health insurance from any provider, and then be reimbursed by the university.

WIU also uses its Equal Opportunity statement to help recruit a diverse faculty. According to Bartges, it's one of the most progressive in Illinois. "We're competing for the top scholars in the country and in the world," says Bartges. "We need to make a visual effort and attempt to connect with people across borders."

One way to create that visual is through advertising. All WIU job ads include the WIU non-discrimination policy as a visual sign to applicants. "I make sure that we don't just say AA/EO Employer," says Bartges. "We think that if you're going to have a commitment to equal opportunity and access, then people should understand what that commitment to opportunity is. It's important that the message is consistently sent."

Bartges also stresses the need to advertise in a variety of places. "I encourage people to post on listservs and job boards—advertise with as many diverse academic publications as possible," says Bartges.

Several organizations and associations are dedicated to furthering diversity in academia, including [The PhD Project](#) and the [American Council on Education's Center for Advancement of Racial and Ethnic Equity \(CAREE\)](#).

The PhD Project works to increase the diversity of corporate America by increasing the diversity of business school faculty. Since they began in 1994, over 700 African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans have completed their doctorate, and only three are doing something other than teaching at colleges and universities.

"Diversity is critical to decision making and critical to the quality of your enterprise," says Bernard Milano, president of The PhD Project. "Any organization that elects to ignore that does so at their own peril."

Milano advises institutions to be aggressive in their recruitment of minorities, pointing out that these candidates have tremendous opportunity in the world of academe. Setting goals is an important step to increasing diversity. "If you don't have goals, then you don't know where to apply your efforts," says Milano.

Diana Cordova, director of CAREE, says institutions should make sure faculty and staff searches are conducted in a fair and inclusive manner. "Some key questions that should be asked: Has the position been broadly advertised? Are we doing all we can to ensure a diverse applicant pool? Are all candidates being asked the same set of questions during the interview process?"

Through leadership development programs, CAREE provides mid- and senior-level administrators of color with opportunities to hone their leadership skills and build strong mentoring networks essential for career advancement, in addition to other initiatives and reports focused on diversity in higher education.

"The challenges facing higher education are just too varied and complex to be addressed by a limited group of individuals," says Cordova. "Higher education needs to be able to draw from all its available talent to maximize its capacities."

*As a result of a national, external search, Ellyn Bartges was recently selected as the Equity and Affirmative Action Officer at St. Cloud State University where she will begin work on January 5, 2010.