

PROFILES IN DIVERSITY JOURNAL

Rejuvenating Diversity Strategies

**Excellus BlueCross BlueShield and Harley-Davidson
are two companies that are working every day to
rejuvenate their Diversity and Inclusion strategies.**



Excellus BlueCross BlueShield: Rejuvenating Diversity in the Hopes of Preparing for Tomorrow



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Across America, corporate entities—private, public, for profit and nonprofit, institutions of higher education, and secondary schools—are all struggling to figure out how to best revitalize their diversity initiatives. Most entities are quickly learning that more must be done if we are to capitalize on our human talent. As such, we must re-examine our current partnerships and create new streams of collaboration, particularly if we are to recruit, attract, and retain diverse candidates.

We are all grappling with how to diversify our candidate pools and, more importantly, how to ascertain what we can do to become a premier employer of choice. That's the million dollar question. As we begin to move forward and determine future employment goals, we begin to think about the skills required for those positions. Regardless of the industry, many of our positions will be in the technical, finance, customer satisfaction, and management fields. This means that most of our new hires will need some form of higher education and, at the very least, a high school education or its equivalent. This is where our greatest challenge will lie.

The need to redefine and expand our diversity perspectives rests with the knowledge that our educational institutions are becoming pinnacles of hope for some and bastions of lost opportunities for others. In 2006, *Time* magazine reported that at least 30 percent of America's high school students have left school without graduating. In the Rochester, New York, city school district, our graduation rates are much worse. We have 50 percent of our students entering 9th grade failing to graduate within 5 years. Less than half of the graduating high school students will attend college.

According to the 2000 Census, 15 percent of the adults in Rochester lack a high school diploma. Latinos account for 42 percent, whites 12.6 percent, blacks 34.5 percent, and Asians 19.6 percent of those without a diploma. Additionally, of the 27.1 percent of the population with a bachelor's degree or higher, Latinos account for 12 percent, whites 28.9 percent, blacks 10.6 percent, and Asians 52.8 percent.

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We must begin to invest in our youth. To this end, we must create new partnerships with our community-based organizations and our local educational institutions to help strengthen literacy programs and encourage educational attainment. At Excellus BlueCross BlueShield, we have initiated several approaches to meet this goal.

Blacks and Latinos are lagging behind their counterparts when it comes to completing high school and getting a college degree.

What is the long term impact? It means that our companies will continue to encounter significant difficulties when trying to recruit candidates from local communities, especially black and Latino prospects. Without a diverse pool of job applicants, candidates, and employees, we will be ill-equipped to compete in the global marketplace.

What must we do to address these challenges? We must begin to invest in our youth. To this end, we must create new partnerships with our community-based organizations and our local educational institutions to help strengthen literacy programs and encourage educational attainment. At Excellus BlueCross BlueShield, we have initiated several approaches to meet this goal:

Partnered with a local community-based Head Start program to support their literacy projects. It is well documented that the promotion of literacy enhances the learning process. Children who are exposed early to letter recognition and letter sounds, will complete the 3rd grade reading at an age-appropriate level. When children develop a love for reading and learning, they will be better prepared to enter college, thus increasing their chances of obtaining a degree.

Established a High School Students on Staff program. The goal of this program is to introduce young adults to the health care industry with the hopes of encouraging them to select health care as a career choice. Students attending the Rochester city schools are eligible for two years of continuous employment. The students must maintain a 2.5 grade point average, have a 93 percent high school attendance rate, and have good performance appraisals. They are matched with a supervisor who in most instances serves as a mentor to guide the student throughout his/her tenure at the company. Upon graduation and acceptance into college, students then are awarded a \$500 scholarship.

Partnered with Rochester's Summer of Opportunity Program. This program is a wonderful example of our collaboration with the city. Every summer our city's Bureau of Youth Services partners with local companies to identify summer youth employment opportunities. For the last several years, we have hired six or seven students who were pre-screened by the city. Two of these students were subsequently offered part-time employment opportunities.

Established a Business Associate Development Program. This program is designed to attract recent MBA or MHA graduates. It is a high-level, rigorous two-year program that enables each candidate to complete three or four rotations in various departments throughout the company. Each rotation lasts anywhere from six to nine months, allowing the new hire to manage projects as an individual contributor or as part of a project team. The goal is to provide the candidate with an opportunity to secure a permanent position within the organization, allowing him or her to touch upon other functional areas. Thus far, four of the five associates have been offered permanent positions. Each candidate also has an executive sponsor to serve as a mentor.

As diversity leaders, it is imperative that we encourage our companies to think outside the box, to re-examine our diversity initiatives and our collaborative efforts. We must renew the efforts to invest in our youth, to provide them with skills to become successful in the academic and employment sectors. We must prepare them so that they may regain the competitive advantage in the global economy.

We must raise our level of expectations. After all, if we don't invest in the communities we serve, we will lose the value gained from having a diverse pool of educated job candidates, and this is a business case imperative we cannot afford to lose.

