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PERSPECTIVE

Diversity in law school critical for the future

By Thomas F. Guernsey

Even subconsciously, we humans are creatures of habit. One example: We cross our arms the same way. Try reversing how you normally do it and see how long you can hold the pose before you feel uncomfortable. Our brains crave the familiar, but that hard-wired craving presents a significant challenge for the legal field.

While most groups say their goal is to be more diverse, what separates genuine inclusion from merely talking about it is developing a comfort with the uncomfortable. Due to how we're wired, this may not be easy. It is, however, an important goal that is worthy of pursuit.

Justice is a direct result of increasing the diversity of voices among law professionals. Our industry, however, is only as diverse as its pool of law students. Achieving diversity in the law school classroom will lead to a far more transformative experience for students, faculty, administrators, alumni and the community.

Among the challenges to this worthy goal is a decline in law school applicants, especially among women of color. Because most law school graduates return to the communities from which they came to practice law, the lack diversity among applicants results in a failure to provide legal services to all who might need them. The lack of diversity in legal education is weakening the profession. That is something that must change if we seek to improve economic growth and development.

When planning how to move your orga-

nization beyond talk and into action, consider the following:

Address inequality

Among the best ways to uncover discrimination is to gather honest feedback from all quarters, including prospective or current students, staff, faculty, alumni, investors or other stakeholders. At this stage of the process, the objective is to encourage dialogue and prevent issues from being swept under the rug. This can be addressed in various ways, such as anonymous surveys, focus groups, town halls or team meetings with a moderator who can objectively facilitate the discussion. The responsibility to create a platform for diversity through open communication belongs to all of us. Questions to ask include:

What is your understanding of racism and sexism and how it manifests in the workplace?

How often do we examine policies and procedures to ensure they aren't impacting specific groups differently?

Do you test your assumptions before acting on them? If so, how?

Define diversity, then define its focus

I'm constantly surprised by how many people explain diversity based simply by what one observes from a face. But "diversity" encompasses areas such as gender, academics, culture, sexual orientation, politics and other factors. Such detail may seem overwhelming, but it is necessary as our goals for diversity must be informed by a broad range of topics and perspec-

tives. Once what it means to be diverse has been defined, it's important to focus on specifics based on where you need to grow. For example, some institutions may choose to focus on race and veterans, while others will work on issues pertaining to socioeconomic status. After identifying these focus areas, prepare to discuss them articulately. If you're going to say your organization is diverse, be prepared to explain how if that question arises.

Create a culture of inclusion at all levels.

Regardless of what point someone is at in law school or in the legal profession, it is mandatory to create a culture of deference where people feel respected and valued. Begin by recruiting the most talented and diverse student body possible. Hiring a skilled admissions staff is also important, as is assigning mentors, and developing creative financial aid support that serves students from all backgrounds. Most important is to know and understand each student's unique careers goals.

The interaction between diversity and admissions, financial aid, faculty, the student body and the future can be difficult to navigate, especially when the number of people aspiring to be lawyers is in serious decline. But considering the state of the profession, diversity isn't an option, it's our lifeblood. Increasing diversity won't just enliven the classroom, it will save the legal industry.

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