

On DiversITy

As a senior administrator at Georgetown University, I have had the pleasure of leading a team of IT professionals from all over the world—from all of the permanently inhabited continents. Periodically, I send e-mail messages to faculty and staff to introduce new team members and share some background information about the team members' countries of origin, their experience, and their expertise. The last time I did this, with names in the roster like Burak Berikoglu, Juan Escalada, and Adeel Hasan, one of the faculty members replied: "I wish our faculty could reflect such pluralism of identities."

Diversity *can* make a difference. At a critical point in our campus completion project, we held a tense meeting with construction company representatives, cabling contractors, university project leaders, and my IT team members. The purpose of the meeting was to determine why the state-of-the-art communications infrastructure was not working as expected. Unsurprisingly, the cabling contractors argued that they had done everything by the book and had all the testing reports to prove that the wiring met the highest-quality standards. They argued that the design may have been inadequate or that the network electronics were either faulty or improperly configured. Then one of the network engineers on my team, Italian-Venezuelan Eduardo Simonetti, shared with the group that he had personally done the most basic of tests, a test that he had practiced in the oil industry in South America when expensive fiber-optics testing equipment was not available. Using an ordinary flashlight held on one end of the fiber strands, he had asked a colleague to report whether or not the light

came through to the other end. It did not, in some cases. As a result of his comments, the cabling contractors agreed to retest; they identified and fixed the problems, and we met all of the deadlines and financial projections.

As Georgetown University becomes increasingly global, with projects on every continent (even Antarctica), the multi-language skills of my team members come in handy. Videoconferences with people in Spain, France, or Italy, for example, are easily coordinated by team members who are fluent in one or more of those languages. When African or Asian students request help with laptops that are preconfigured with software in other languages, we can help. When visiting faculty members must conduct research in languages other than English, we understand what they need and can provide better service.

I have recently joined the Advisory Board of the Hispanic Information Technology Executive Council (HITEC). This nonprofit organization is committed to expanding the role of Hispanics in IT leadership. A similar organization, the Information Technology Senior Management Forum (ITSMF), is "dedicated exclusively to fostering upper-level executive talent among African-American IT professionals." Large corporations such as Target, Microsoft, and Procter & Gamble and executives from Oracle and Korn/Ferry International, for example, endorse and actively participate in these organizations. It is wonderful to witness the commitment of top-notch organizations and experienced IT executives to the goal of promoting diversity in the IT arena. As the United States continues to become culturally more diverse, so should all realms of economic activity, particularly

those that are business enablers such as information technology.

As a member of the academic community, I find it sobering to realize that in the United States, the enrollment rates for minorities, particularly for blacks and Hispanics, still lag behind the national average. According to the June 2008 U.S. Department of Education's "Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions" report, only 4.0 percent of undergraduate students enrolled in Title IV institutions in the fall of 2006 were Hispanics and only 5.5 percent were black non-Hispanics.¹ Without proper education, minorities cannot join the workforce as IT professionals and will never become IT executives. And without these minority employees, companies and nonprofit organizations cannot derive the benefits of a diverse work force.

As a newly minted U.S. citizen, I remember well the words of the District of Columbia superior court judge who administered the Pledge of Allegiance to me and the others in my group: "Do not forget your customs and language of origin. I sincerely hope that you and your kids can teach me and my kids about the rich cultural heritage that you bring to the United States." This is a lesson that our diverse IT team members can teach all of us in higher education. Let us continue to work toward these goals.

Note

1. Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, "Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2006" (June 2008), Table 1, p. 4, <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008173.pdf>>.

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