Higher Education Institutions Join Fortune 500 Companies in Diversity and Inclusion Pledge

BY AIVI NGUYEN • JULY 27, 2018

A year ago, the CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion launched (the "Action"). The Action, which is the brainchild of PricewaterhouseCooper's (PwC) U.S. Chairman Tim Ryan, is a call to CEOs to pledge to advance the cause of diversity and inclusion by doing three specific things: create a safe environment for discussion of difficult issues; acknowledge and address unconscious bias; and share best practices. When the Action launched, 175 CEOs joined PwC in the pledge, including those of Fortune 500 companies like Cisco, HP, Morgan Stanley, Staples, Target, and Walmart. Today, there are more than 450 CEOs who have joined.

But it's not just CEOs who are pledging to tackle the issues of unconscious bias and institutional discrimination. Presidents of colleges and universities have joined the march, with nearly 50 academic institutions and associations presently on board. In fact, local college and university presidents have joined the Action, including Framingham State University, Babson College, and Bentley University. For institutions of higher education, joining the Action will include taking a long, hard look at the demographics of all the groups that comprise the organization – from the student body, to the faculty, to the administration, to the board of directors – and having thoughtful, candid, and ongoing conversations about whether the statistics match the goals of the organization, and if not, why. Given the objectives of the Action, it makes perfect sense for presidents of schools to join CEOs in tackling pervasive and insidious institutional discrimination. Colleges and universities are places that encourage and foster open discussion and idea sharing, and it may be that the best practices will come from those schools that have taken the pledge.

The end goal of the Action will not happen overnight and success cannot be measured in hard numbers. After its inaugural year, a notable percentage of CEOs reported that their organizations were engaged in the difficult conversations, implementing training, and looking to their partners in the Action for support and guidance. Given this positive trajectory, PwC announced that it will spend $10 million underwriting the second year.

Client Tip: Whether or not a college or university officially joins the Action, schools should still make it a priority to address diversity and inclusion issues at their institutions. A good starting point would be a thorough review of written policies and

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procedures with an eye towards whether those documents do enough to encourage inclusion.

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