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THE COMPANY WORKING TO FIX HIGHER EDUCATION'S DIVERSITY PROBLEM

THE PHD PROJECT BELIEVES THAT THE WAY TO CULTIVATE MORE DIVERSITY IN BUSINESS IS TO START WITH THE UNIVERSITY FACULTY.

BY GWEN MORAN

Completing the enormous amount of work it takes to earn a Ph.D. is a remarkable accomplishment. But when Mariana Lebron completed her advanced degree in strategic management, she was just the 39th Latina to graduate with an advanced business degree in the U.S. and the first to do so at Syracuse University.

"I was extremely shocked [to learn I was the first]," she says. "When you're the first to go through something, you don't think you're the first. You're thinking, I only have one life to live, and this is my dream. I don't want to waste it."

Lebron, now an assistant professor of management at Towson University in Towson, Maryland, says being part of The PhD Project helped her reach her goal. The organization is dedicated to increasing the number of people of color in business leadership positions, especially at colleges

and universities, through mentoring, connecting with other candidates and faculty, conferences, and other forms of support and information.

BUSINESS DIVERSITY STARTS WITH EDUCATION DIVERSITY

The PhD Project was founded as an initiative of accounting giant KPMG's foundation. The firm's leadership believed that the way to cultivate more diversity among their business candidates was to work on diversity among college and university faculty, says Bernard J. Milano, president of The PhD Project and the KPMG Foundation.

In 2005, The PhD Project was established as a nonprofit organization. When the initiative was first created in 1994, there were just 294 black, Latino, and Native American business school professors in the U.S., including those at historically black colleges and universities and Hispanic-serving institutions. Today, there are 1,176 faculty members, Milano says, most of whom were involved in one way or another with The PhD Project.

"When we talk to people about why they did not take the step toward becoming a professor entering a doctoral program on their own, they say they don't know how to even start the process. Secondly, having never seen an African-American professor unless they went to a black college, they never dreamed that this was something that was available to them," Milano says.

Mark Dawkins, PhD, an associate professor of accounting at the University of Georgia, has been involved with the organization from its formation in 1994. At the time, he was in the last year of his doctoral program and was asked to be a student representative from Florida State University. He recalls enthusiastic corporate sponsors trying to figure out the best resources to support their target audience. He says, at first there was pushback from faculty because KPMG used the funding from their "Research and Opportunities in Auditing" course and used that funding to start the project, eliminating a source of grant funding for some faculty members.

"There was some skepticism, but to their credit, they stuck with it," he recalls.

PROVIDING A NETWORK OF SUPPORT—AND SUCCESS

Since then, the organization has helped nearly 1,250 doctoral candidates, many of whom have gone on to faculty positions. The organization has five minority doctoral students associations (DSAs) that support members who are pursuing doctoral degrees in accounting, finance,

information systems, management and marketing. Members get access to a private website and the organization's conference, where students can network and meet faculty members. All expenses for PhD Project conferences are covered for eligible members. Lebron says that simply having access to other students and faculty members to discuss the challenges she faced was invaluable.

"You have to prove yourself in a different way from other students. The PhD Project provided me with mentoring behind the scenes," she says.

And the outcomes are impressive. The minority doctoral completion rate for students in The PhD Project is 90%, while the average overall U.S. doctoral program completion rate is just 70%.

From the beginning, the initiative had a number of sponsors in addition to the KPMG Foundation, including Citi and Association To Advance Collegiate Schools Of Business (AACSB International). Today, dozens of corporations, foundations, colleges and universities support the \$2.3 million organization.

While Dawkins didn't participate as a student—he was nearing graduation when the initiative was launching—he says his continued involvement in the organization has shown him what a difference it makes in the lives of the students. Today, he goes to the conferences and represents the University of Georgia, recruiting PhD candidates.

"We still have a long way to go, but I'm afraid to even imagine where we would be if The PhD Project had not come along and moved the needle in terms of diversity in the front of the classroom," he says.