



Business School Dean Roundtable

by *Rebecca Prinster*
business schools, deans, PhD Project

INSIGHT Into Diversity recently spoke with three alumni of the PhD Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans attain their business PhD and become professors who mentor the next generation of business leaders. These alumni are current deans of U.S. business schools.

We spoke with each of them about their paths to higher education administration, and they reflected on the PhD Project's value as a support network and tool for increasing minority representation in business schools.



Miles Davis, PhD, is dean of the Harry F. Byrd Jr. School of Business and professor of management at Shenandoah University in Virginia. He is an authority on entrepreneurship, focusing on areas of integrity, values, and principles within the business sector, as well as faith-based entrepreneurship. Davis has worked as a managing consultant and principal for EDS Corporation and has consulted for Boeing Corporation and the U.S. Mint.



Rowena Ortiz-Walters, PhD, is dean of the SUNY Plattsburgh School of Business and Economics and professor of management. She previously served as chair of management in the School of Business and Engineering at Quinnipiac University, where she helped found its Business Women in Search of Excellence initiative and the Center for Women and Business. She has also served as an advisory board member for a study on gender diversity for Harvard Medical School.



Delmonize "Del" Smith, PhD, is dean of the College of Business and Public Affairs at Alabama A&M University. He has had an extensive career in the business sector, having launched and later sold his first tech startup at the age of 25. His most recent strategic human resources and information technology management startup sold for \$750 million. Smith has also served as a systems analyst in the U.S. Army, as a consultant for Fortune 1000 firms, and as an economic development commissioner.

The PhD Project released a survey in May showing that of the 1,601 U.S. business schools, only 33 have African American deans and nine have Hispanic deans; that's 2 percent and 0.5 percent, respectively. In fact, the report shows that African Americans and Hispanics have greater representation at the country's largest companies than they do as deans of business schools. Why do you think this is, and what can business schools do to promote minorities in leadership positions?

Smith: There are many reasons, of course, but we can't ignore the aspect that higher education is a very strong, cultured institution, and because of that strong culture, there's been a certain way of doing things for a very long time. That includes the selection of faculty members and people who will lead business schools. There have been some gains in corporate America. ... Even though large corporations also have strong cultures, there's this aspect of being more public and under scrutiny, and these corporations are trying to adjust the makeup of their boards and leadership to better reflect their customers.

I think higher education has had less pressure to make those types of changes over time. However, I do believe that we're entering into a period when more people are paying attention to this issue. I think we'll start to see, if not change on the horizon, at least discussions as to why this is the case and what can be done about it.

Ortiz-Walters: I would say that a lot of it comes down to corporate America making greater headway promoting and emphasizing diversity, partly because there's been a longer tradition of going after and promoting it in the corporate sector versus the academic sector. I've conducted studies about accounting firms, etc., and it's always so amazing to me the amount of money, time, and energy that goes into different efforts and initiatives to really focus on career development, retention, and promotion of minorities — which obviously has a positive impact on the pipeline of minorities and minority leaders.

Both time and resource allocation have contributed to what we're seeing in regard to disparities among minority leaders in the corporate sector versus academia. Also, there's a common trajectory of what you're going to do as a PhD student: You're going to do research, service, and teaching and really excel at it, but there's no fourth component about leadership. So I think it's really critical for business school faculty to identify those folks and provide them academic leadership as a career option — and having that become the norm over time.

Additionally, I'd really love to collaborate with the current 42 minority business school deans because, as a collective voice, we can make diversifying leadership a priority.

Davis: The financial rewards that come with being well educated and having a business background are great in corporate America. Therefore, the path for people of color [who have] MBAs has not been to aspire to jobs in academia, but to white collar jobs; the social incentive to engage in academia is small compared to the incentive to engage in business, which is where the prestige is or is perceived to be. The PhD Project stood that on its head and said, "Look, to be successful, let's take that success and educate the next generation of leaders and change the face of corporate America by going into the classroom and providing natural mentors to students of color. Let's also provide an opportunity for the majority population to see people of color in positions of responsibility." This allows for diversity in front of the classroom to change diversity in organizations. However, I would say what academia needs is an ability to engage in effective leadership and intercultural competency, and who is better at that than somebody

who's had to live that all their life? Ideally, these people should make wonderful deans and administrators, but [they] require the system to re-think what it's looking for.

The most recent enrollment figures from the AACSB (the accrediting organization for business schools) show that Native Americans make up less than 1 percent of business school students, African Americans about 10 percent, Hispanics 13.5 percent, and whites 76 percent. Why does the underrepresentation of minority groups in accredited business schools persist, despite recruitment efforts?

Smith: I think the best way to look at this question is to think about our historically black universities and our minority-serving institutions. These organizations have in their mission an attempt to educate students who otherwise would be left out of the educational opportunity at some of our other universities. If you look at how some of these business schools — particularly accredited business schools — evaluate [admissions], they pride themselves a lot of times on having lower acceptance rates, which means they are more selective and sends the message that this is the place you want to come to if you really are trying to be part of an exclusive group.

I think that approach creates conflict when it comes to trying to increase the number of minorities that are attending accredited business schools. Not to say that our business schools need to be more open to accepting anyone and everyone, but I think they do need to take a close look at what message they are sending to individuals who are having challenges meeting a very selective standard and lower acceptance rates. I think there is a reason for accredited business schools to take a close look at their policies on acceptance and evaluate [based] on more than just GPA, ACT, or SAT scores.

Ortiz-Walters: I would say that certainly a piece of it is the diversity of recruitment efforts that are being utilized — efforts like which schools [students] are being recruited from and the effectiveness of recruitment tools being used by business schools. I've done studies on diversifying higher education at the faculty level, and there are certain best practices for even how you craft the job description, so I'm wondering if some of that isn't at play at the student level.

Above recruitment, I think the big piece is retention and making sure that minority students are aware of your retention efforts. For example, when I finished high school, I had several offers to go to different colleges. I ended up going to the University of Connecticut, but I had a free ride to Dartmouth and other Ivy League schools; I didn't go because I didn't feel like I would fit in or people would understand me. Not to say anything negative about Dartmouth; they may have had excellent retention tools — I just wasn't aware of them.

Role models are a big piece of the retention puzzle, too; students don't see individuals like them in business schools, and that makes it more difficult for them to envision themselves there.

Davis: It's a multifaceted issue. Something that's been well reported on recently is the self-selection out of selective programs by minority students. Particularly at independent schools — but even at flagship state institutions — minority students will choose to not even apply to those programs because of concerns about their ability to pay or how receptive the environment will be to them. So these students often go to less competitive schools, or they go where their friends go, and quite frankly, if they're high academic achievers and high need, they would pay little to nothing for their education. But it's hard to convince a person who's lived in a minority

world most or all of his or her life to all of a sudden drop into the middle of a majority population where he or she might feel he or she won't stack up.

The other side is the institutional side — do the institutions support and actively recruit those students? Are you going into the places where these students are? Do you have anybody who speaks Spanish who can communicate with not just the students, but with the parents? Can you mirror the experience of the students you're trying to bring into the program? Then once you do that, what support systems do you have?

In what ways do you believe your participation in the PhD Project helped lead you to becoming a dean of a business school, and how has being a member of a minority affected or influenced the work you do?

Smith: The PhD Project was tremendously valuable, primarily because I was exposed to other individuals who I could relate to in terms of background experiences. I think that simply being around that organization, around other like-minded individuals with similar experiences, and seeing them go through a similar process really provided me with a tremendous amount of confidence that I could be successful in becoming a faculty member. And that confidence is actually what made me think there was a possibility I could be even more than that.

In terms of the other part of the question — I think it's about recognizing that when it comes to resources, you have to be very careful about excluding anyone based upon any type of preconceived notions or biases. Being a minority business school dean, when I see students from various backgrounds, from experiences different from my own, I think I have a natural tendency to not discount that and to try to find out more about that person as an individual to see what he or she brings to the table.

Ortiz-Walters: I love the PhD Project. I think the network is the most invaluable aspect. For example, when I got my job offer, I knew I could call someone from the project at any minute — without having talked to this individual for a while, because we do get busy as academics — and just ask really fundamental questions like: How do I do this? How do I negotiate for that? What do I need to know? What things do I need to watch out for? Also, the social and emotional support that you get with people willing to mentor and listen to you, that's really critical. And because the PhD Project is still an association that's relatively small, we get to know each other really well.

The PhD Project also helped with developing my leadership ability; I was president of the minority Doctoral Students Association for my division for one year. In terms of being a dual minority member, I think that influenced a lot of what I do and certainly impacted how I teach. I conduct research on these particular issues for underrepresented students, such as racial minorities, and I co-founded a center for women in business at my last institution. Because I'm Hispanic, there are issues that are very important to me that contribute to the ways in which I can help students have a better experience.

Davis: Let me state this unequivocally: Without the PhD Project, I would not be a dean of a business school. Quite frankly, without the PhD Project, I would not be a professor. The minority Doctoral Students Association exposed me to scholars, gave me the opportunity to build a cohort, and allowed me to co-author my first paper — it gave me a support structure that allowed me to become a professor. And then once there, the support of the PhD Project said, "OK, this is the path that you can choose, we need people of color and minorities in

administrative roles.” And as the first dean out of the PhD Project, I’m proud of the way that happened, because I represent what the system can do. By virtue of my background, I’m also conscious, whether I want to be or not, that I am a role model. When students see me walking around campus, they’re watching what I’m doing, and when a parent shows up on campus and sees me in an administrative role, they smile, they come up to me, shake my hand, and say, “If my child is having an issue, can they come talk to you?” These aren’t even students in the business program.

Being a minority dean has made me much more conscious of and sensitive to issues, and I have to wear more than one hat, whether I want to or not.

The AACSB recently appointed its first chief diversity and inclusion advocate to promote diversity at member schools. What effect do you think her appointment will have on business school curricula or diversity requirements for accreditation? What other efforts would you suggest the AACSB undertake to promote diversity and inclusion among U.S. business schools?

Smith: I would encourage the AACSB, particularly this advocate, to first and foremost look at how they’re defining diversity and inclusion, or even leave it up to the business schools to present how they define diversity and inclusion. Specifically for historically black colleges (HBCUs) or minority-serving institutions (MSIs), I believe it is of tremendous value to ensure that there is an aspect of that in their missions, and if this individual can understand and recognize that and work with HBCUs and MSIs to try to figure out how to leverage that definition of diversity as an asset, I think that could be beneficial.

In my time around the AACSB, there hasn’t been a lot of discussion about HBCUs and MSIs, and I think there’s a tremendous amount of knowledge that could be gained from how [those institutions] go about their missions. It would be beneficial if the AACSB and this advocate could actually interact and work with HBCUs and MSIs to learn some best practices that could be applied toward predominantly majority institutions.

Ortiz-Walters: Certainly the appointment is a positive move for business. I think what it will do at the school level is really help us maintain standards for retention, whether it’s curriculum, programmatic changes, or diversifying leadership. Just having someone in that role will help us to focus on diversity, because this will be a person who will constantly remind us that it is an important issue. And I think — this is actually what I’m hopeful for — that this individual will be able to help flesh out the diversity requirements for accreditation in a more meaningful way and answer questions like, what exactly is beneficial about diversity? What role does or should diversity play in developing a high-quality education for business schools?

In terms of what more the AACSB could do, I think it could serve as a resource clearinghouse of some sort for recruiting faculty members.

Davis: I’m glad they did that. It’s unfortunate that we have to appoint somebody to do this, but I’m also glad she was appointed to the division.

I think we have to understand what we mean by diversity and inclusion since that term has been expanded. Who are you talking about, and what do you mean? Are you targeting the increase of people of color? Are you trying to increase the number of minority faculty? I think organizations

function better when they are clear in articulating their objective. So what I would like to see from the AACSB is a clearer statement about what the objectives are.

Rebecca Prinster is a senior staff writer for *INSIGHT Into Diversity*. The PhD Project is a partner of *INSIGHT Into Diversity*. To learn more, visit phdproject.org.