

## Lowcountry's old-school and new-age workplaces struggle to improve diversity

By Abigail Darlington and Lauren Sausser

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"Awesome boss," said Stacy Corbett, LPN, (left) about Benita Curnell, RN, as they walked through the MUSC campus at the end of a workday in a dermatology clinic there on Jan. 21. WADE

SPEES/STAFF

### What is diversity?

Diversity means more than a mix of races. It can refer to gender, sexual orientation, economic status, cultural experience, age and more. Advocates of diversity in the workplace say (<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/labor/news/2012/07/12/11900/the-top-10-economic-facts-of-diversity-in-the-workplace/>) that it helps drive creativity and innovation, grow the consumer base, improve competition and boost the quality of employees.

Female deans at the Medical University of South Carolina weren't paid as much as their male colleagues in the mid-1990s when Dr. Thaddeus Bell became director of the university's Office of Minority Affairs, but he almost immediately fixed that.

First, though, he needed to change his new department's name.

"The Office of Minority Affairs was such a lightning rod at the university at the time I took it over, and the connotations coming from it were so negative, I didn't want to have to deal with that," Bell said. "It's been the Office of Diversity ever since."

As Charleston's second largest employer, MUSC has inevitably dealt with varying degrees of inequality — both actual and perceived — since its inception. The issue came into sharp focus almost 50 years ago during an MUSC nurses' strike that made national news.

## About this series

In a five-part series, *Pursuing the Dream*, The Post and Courier is examining how blacks and whites in the Charleston area interact in the way we work, learn, play and pray, and what businesses, educators and faith leaders are doing to improve diversity.

Jan. 25: Local voices on race

today: Diversity in the workplace

next Sunday: Diversity in local schools

## 1969 hospital strike

In March 1969, workers unhappy about discriminatory practices, unequal pay, institutional harassment and widespread racial discord at the Medical College Hospital went on strike.

The 113-day walkout was a watershed moment for Charleston and a manifestation of the movement's emphasis on economic justice during the latter part of the 1960s.

The strike was the culmination of nearly two years of organizing and protest. Mary Moultrie, a licensed nurse whose

The fact that the university and hospital are still working through these issues may be explained, in part, because it employs so many people — more than 12,000 today. The campus is a microcosm of the larger Lowcountry.

Yet that larger landscape has changed considerably in the past half century, at least in terms of economic growth and diversification. The academic, health care, military and hospitality pillars of the local economy are still firmly in place, but expanding service and technology sectors now contribute to it in tangible ways.

But MUSC, established in 1824, and local tech companies, which arrived mostly in the 21st century, continue to grapple with the same problem: how to increase the diversity of their workplaces, especially for higher-level jobs.

For some tech firms and other companies, here and nationally, the priority has been business success, not necessarily a diversified workforce. Facebook, Google and Apple all have been cited in the news media for lack of diversity. Generally, blacks and Hispanics make up 2 percent to 7 percent of the workforce at those large firms.

Locally, smaller tech companies also are struggling to attract minority applicants.

"We've got a pipeline problem and a diversity problem, which is a double whammy," said Julie Moreland, an executive for PeopleMatter, a locally based developer of human resources software. For tech companies, she said, the talent pool is limited, and it's predominantly white and male.

## Serving the community

Twenty years after Bell took charge of MUSC's Office of Diversity, MUSC is still trying to improve its own image. Two weeks ago, administrators convened a meeting with more than a dozen black community leaders to discuss how they're working toward that end. In January, the university also hired Anton Gunn, a former Obama administration official, as its new chief diversity officer.

On paper, MUSC appears to be a diverse workplace. Nearly 30 percent of all hospital employees are black; 13.4 percent of the university faculty and staff are black; and 28 percent of university non-faculty are black. By comparison, the state population is 30 percent black, 64 percent white and about 5 percent Latino, numbers that closely correspond to the tri-county area.

Those MUSC percentages start shrinking among elite positions on campus. For example, seven of nine top administrators who report directly to MUSC President David Cole are white. Thirteen of 16 Board of Trustees members are

credentials were not fully recognized by the Medical College, organized informal get-togethers, sought advice from Septima P. Clark and invited community leaders, such as Bill Saunders, to join the fight.

About 450 people from the Medical College and 80 from Charleston County Hospital joined the effort. They set up a chapter (Local 1199B) of the Hospital and Nursing Home Employees union, but it wasn't recognized by the state.

Coretta Scott King, honorary chairwoman of the hospital union, came to march along Ashley Avenue, joined by Andrew Young and Ralph Abernathy, leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The state, prohibited from bargaining with the union, would not fulfill all the protesters' demands, offering instead a compromise that modestly raised wages and established a grievance procedure.

*Adam Parker*

white males.

"All those things are just the numbers," Gunn said. "But the question is how do you make sure the numbers help you achieve the big picture goal — which is, if our community looks a certain way, how do we make sure we're serving that community in the most caring, authentic, respectable and valued way possible?"

Don Gordon, executive director of Furman University's Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Policy, and Public Leadership, which operates the Diversity Leadership Initiative, said it's a complicated challenge, one each organization might pursue differently. But in general, he said, it is extremely important to cultivate over time, with committed investment, a growing, diverse pool of qualified resources so that when hiring is done, employers can fill jobs with the best-qualified candidate regardless of race and gender. Because the pool is diverse, the employee base eventually will become diverse, Gordon said.

## New opportunities

Charleston's tech hub, one of the most rapidly growing sectors in the region, lacks formal strategies to ensure people of all races and backgrounds have an equal shot at landing the highly skilled jobs. Its leaders say the talent pool it hires from is too small and doesn't have a diverse mix of applicants.

"The technology industry would love to have that diversity if it were there in the applicant pool," said Moreland of PeopleMatter.

Christina Lock, a human resources executive with SPARC in Charleston, said the workforce at the software development firm is about 6 percent black and Hispanic. She said the company is interested in improving that figure.

"Especially in the technology industry where it is very creative and it's about how you solve problems, if you can bring in diverse backgrounds and ideas and exposure, it's only going to help create a better product," Lock said.

The company tries to draw as many minority candidates as possible, but the white-dominated pool of applicants is "just naturally what it is."

## Photos



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Many in the tech industry point to public education as a potential ally. They say more programs are needed to pique kids' interests in computer sciences at an early age.

"That's a great way not to just increase the numbers but the diversity of this pipeline," said Ernest Andrade, a founder and director of the



Charleston Digital Corridor. "When I ask tech entrepreneurs at what age they got interested in tech, it is always between the age of 11 and 13."



The Department of



Energy recently announced a consortium aimed at attracting more students and



minorities to cyber security careers, which is being implemented in the Charleston County schools and seven historically black colleges across the state. The school district also administers its Lowcountry Tech Academy to expose more minorities and low-income students to computer science programs and tech-driven



career paths.



Sarah Earle, associate principal of the Tech Academy, said the school's efforts are working. "We've been here for two years and we're starting to see students get scholarships, awards, internships, so we're seeing now the tangible results of what the program was intended to do," she said.



The said adults, too, are showing interest in learning about tech careers.



"We have adults asking us to have classes at night," she said. "Any adult who walks through this building says, 'Oh my gosh, where was this when I was in school?'"

After the Charleston Naval Shipyard closed in 1996, most economic development efforts were aimed at drawing a wider range of industries to ensure no single employer could ever destabilize the Lowcountry's economy again.

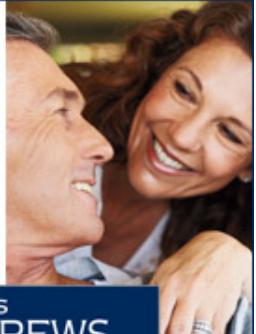
"Back then, our economy was ... two-dimensional, with federal military jobs and then tourism," said Steve Warner, a vice president of the Charleston Regional Development Alliance. "So our focus for the last 20 years has been on diversifying the economy."

Creating a strong tech hub became a priority because it didn't require major physical resources to develop, Warner said. Tech businesses mostly needed a skilled workforce.

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"We've passed that first hurdle, to demonstrate that we can grow the tech sector," said Andrade of the Digital Corridor. "Now in the next 10, 20 years, we need to focus on the issues that are important to that sector, which is creating more diversity within the industry."

"As bright as people are in the technology sector, if people actually focused the time and energy on solving this issue, we could solve it. And we could solve it in probably five to six years," PeopleMatter's Moreland said.

## 'In the right direction?'

Bell, who retired from the Office of Diversity in 2004, worries that MUSC has recently lost ground. Diversity on campus isn't getting better, he said. In fact, "It's gotten worse again."

"When I was there, as director, I felt like we were moving in the right direction," he said recently at his private practice in North Charleston, where he still treats patients. "I would say people thought we had arrived ... and that was the furthest thing from the truth."

Clearly, some tension still exists. The MUSC Board of Trustees was criticized last year for the way it dealt with a group of silent protesters, who have complained about the hospital's grievance process for employees. They have argued that some workers, including a black nurse who was recently fired, have been treated unfairly by their supervisors.

At an October meeting, the board limited the number of protesters allowed in the board room at any given time, despite the fact that the meeting was open to the public.

President Cole has since convened a new committee of community leaders, including some of the protesters, to discuss how diversity on campus might be improved and the steps that MUSC is already taking to ensure that happens.

But Gunn said some critics still act like the 1969 nurses' strike happened yesterday.

"I dare say, you won't find many people who were working here in 1969," he said. "You might even find a bunch of people who weren't even alive in 1969 when that happened."

Dean Allen Floyd, a family physician in Columbia who graduated from MUSC in 1976, agreed that Charleston has changed since then. The racism and discrimination he encountered in the community as one of few black students nearly 40 years ago was rampant, he said.

"I look at it more broadly, and what it was like in the state of South Carolina. MUSC reflected a lot of that," Floyd said. "It was a continuation of the same."

For decades, early black graduates of MUSC experienced anxiety, nervousness — even anger — when they returned to campus.

"The black doctors had a name for it. We called it the Charleston syndrome," said Bell, who also graduated in 1976. "It's kind of like post-traumatic stress syndrome. ... For many years, I'd experience that. As soon as I'd walk on campus, I felt anxious. I felt angry. I felt like it was a place I didn't want to be. I felt like that for many years even when I was an attending physician."

That certainly improved, Bell said. Now, he's confident that new MUSC leaders are addressing diversity head-on — not as a problem to be solved, but as a strength to be promoted.

"These are issues that MUSC is still obviously dealing with," he said. "In some ways, we haven't made a lot of progress."

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### **Boeing reaches into community to boost diversity**

When Otha Meadows, president of the Charleston Trident Urban League, was traveling in Italy a couple of years ago, a job recruitment ad in an Italian magazine caught his eye. Boeing was looking for workers to relocate to South Carolina.

"Lots of employees (initially) came from other places because, quite frankly, the workforce wasn't here," Meadows said. "I challenged them to implement steps — education and employment opportunities — to ensure that people who'd been lifelong residents had an opportunity to work for Boeing."

Boeing didn't need much prodding, though. The company was determined to build a diverse workforce and to reach deep into the local community to help it achieve that goal, Meadows said.

"They've gone beyond just the core services of building airplanes, and they are putting tentacles out in the community as it relates to education, as it relates to the training center," he said.

Meadows should know. One of those tentacles extends to his organization, which helps prepare local people for entry into the workforce.

Today, minorities comprise more than 30 percent of the local Boeing workforce, Jack Jones told Meadows last week. Jones is vice president and general manager of Boeing South Carolina. "We're not there yet, but we're working on it," he said, according to Meadows.

Boeing's outreach extends also to Trident Technical College, to the readySC training program, administered by The Center for Accelerated Technology Training, part of the S.C. Technical College System, and to local schools and nonprofits.

"The leadership of Boeing has said to me, 'We can teach anyone to build an airplane.' What they can't do is teach individuals work ethics," Meadows said. "If you don't know the significance of getting to work on time, having good attendance, being part of a team, if you have issues that impact your ability to be productive in the workplace, those are issues the Urban League can help with."

The Urban League assists 30 to 40 people each month, he said. It's not about intellect or ability; it's about preparedness and street smarts, about knowing the techniques of employment. But the state's education system is not helping matters, Meadows said.

"If we can get this thing called education fixed, what that will do in itself is provide more opportunities across the board for minorities, to (give them) the skill sets to compete," he said. "It's a piece that we really need to get fixed here in the state."

Of course, prejudice still plays a part in inhibiting diversity in the workplace, and it must be overcome, Meadows said.

"If we can help those on the margins who have historically been excluded, and give them opportunities to contribute ... that bodes well for everybody."

#### Keywords

[Dr. Thaddeus Bell \(/section/search&facet.filter=Keywords:Dr.ThaddeusBell\)](#)

[Anton Gunn \(/section/search&facet.filter=Keywords:AntonGunn\)](#)

[Charleston Digital Corridor \(/section/search&facet.filter=Keywords:CharlestonDigitalCorridor\)](#)

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[Medical University of South Carolina \(/section/search&facet.filter=Keywords:MedicalUniversityofSouthCarolina\)](#)

[MUSC \(/section/search&facet.filter=Keywords:MUSC\)](#)

[Office of Diversity \(/section/search&facet.filter=Keywords:OfficeDiversity\)](#)

[Office of Minority Affairs \(/section/search&facet.filter=Keywords:OfficeMinorityAffairs\)](#)

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