



Singular purpose unites diverse group

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Local leaders develop palette for creating more colorful city

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Managing diversity is a challenge facing Greenville, but successfully taking advantage of it can help attract businesses and residents to the area, said participants in the Diversity Leadership Academy.

"Shifting work force and marketplace demographics make diversity management a critical challenge for the Upstate," said a program announcing the initial Diversity Leadership Academy held in the Upstate. "The DLA offers an opportunity to build diversity management skills alongside your Upstate colleagues.

Over the past five months, 38 business, government, religious and civic leaders have met one day a month to learn the skills needed to manage diversity and initiate change. The program, sponsored by Furman University's Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership, began at the behest of Calder Ehrmann, diversity director at Michelin North America.

"Unity through diversity" is a theme to be sought after as participants "try to make our communities better," said Richard W. Riley, a former governor of South Carolina.

Benny Walker, Furman's vice president for enrollment, said the academy, which will continue next fall, is an attempt to make Greenville and the Upstate "more inclusive and accepting of diversity in the work and social environments, helping attract companies and helping them retain employees."

Diversity is a given at Michelin North America, Ehrmann said. The company has employees from 30 nations in its Greenville location.

It's also a given in Greenville, he said.

"You walk down Main Street and hear all the languages, see all the foods," he said.

"This city is just this far," Ehrmann said, holding his fingers about an inch apart, "from being a world-class community," and the academy can give community leaders the skills needed to help move it that short distance in the next five to 10 years.

"The acid test is going to be three or four years in the making," he said, when projects embracing diversity succeed -- or don't make it.

Juan Johnson, Coca-Cola Co. vice president and Diversity Leadership Academy president, said "our experience is that most communities have lots of upside opportunities in terms of diversity management."

The program began in Atlanta several years ago. It expanded to Greenville and Indianapolis this year. Also, the academy is working with Ohio State University's Master's of Business Administration program, Ehrmann said.

Much of the work done to handle diversity successfully tends to be carried out in corporations, Johnson said, although government, non-profit organizations and schools have the same needs -- but not the same resources.

The Upstate version of the academy raised \$50,000, most of it from businesses, but some from individuals, to provide scholarships for those not able to fund the \$4,000 cost of the Diversity Leadership Academy, Erhmann said.

"Most people are diversity-challenged," Johnson said. "We learn from our experiences. Past experiences guide our current actions. The problem with that model is that things change."

People need to learn to suspend assumptions, then test those assumptions, he said. The academy teaches leaders the skills needed to do this. They then are expected to spread those skills.

Members of this first Diversity Leadership Academy "can make things happen," Johnson said. "They bond. They develop relationships. They bring passion to their projects."

Cutline:

OWEN RILEY JR./Staff

Managing assets: From left, Idella Glenn of Furman, business owner Sheldon Early, attorney Jacquelyn Austin and Juana Slade of the Anderson Area Medical Center discuss ideas at a Diversity Leadership Academy lunch Tuesday.

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