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Improving diversity landscape will strengthen state

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South Carolina is involved in a major economic transition. This transition from "low tech" to a knowledge-based business model has been well publicized. Much less visible to the public across the state are the dramatic developments that are occurring in the field of diversity.

Having lived far too long with the state's race and gender legacy, many of our citizens have concluded that it is time to generate diversity progress in tandem with the economic progress.

Men and women, black, white, Hispanic and Asian, are quietly stepping forward to create a community of interest. This community of interest is educating itself and is engaging the state's legacy of race and gender. The goal of this united effort is to address the diversity issues and to improve our situation so that South Carolina can compete on equal terms with other states and regions as well as internationally.

Let's look at the education facet first. The Diversity Leadership Academy was launched in Greenville in 2003. Housed in the Richard E. Riley Institute at Furman University, the academy equips leaders with the tools and skills to manage in an ever more diverse environment.

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Class is held one full day per month for five months and includes a real-world capstone project. The curriculum explores familial, geographic, demographic and socioeconomic as well as race and gender diversity. Participants develop diversity management skills that result in a more successful organization and an improved society.

The capstone experiences have touched all areas of our community, including education, government, medical and civic activities. One project involved a plan to improve the transition of international students into our middle schools. Another one provided a Spanish translation service for EMS and other hospital services. A third capstone created an annual awards dinner to honor diversity champions.

Juan Johnson, a vice president of the Coca-Cola Co. and president of the Diversity Leadership Academy, conducts the classroom learning experience. Mr. Johnson is a magnificent leader who has mastered the diversity management methodology and who easily connects with the students in the class. Even in the most delicate diversity situations, he takes the participants from the academic to the practical with an unparalleled grace and finesse.

Dr. R. Roosevelt Thomas of the American Institute for Managing Diversity in Atlanta is the leading authority on diversity management. He developed the academy curriculum with a grant from the Coca-Cola Co. The academy is currently operating in Atlanta, Indianapolis and Baltimore, along with Charleston and Greenville. Plans call for the next academy to be launched in Wichita, Kan.

The academy in South Carolina is supported by a consortium of companies including the Coca-Cola Co. of Atlanta, Michelin North America and Furman University. Wachovia Bank joined the consortium in 2005.

Participants in the academy come from the corporate world, nonprofits, the governmental sectors, the faith community and civic volunteers. All are being equipped to make informed diversity decisions in the midst of differences, similarities and tension.

Graduates from Anderson, Greenville and Spartanburg along the I-85 corridor will soon be joined by the first class of the new academy in the Lowcountry, which was launched in January. By the end of this month, there will be 200 Diversity Leadership Academy graduates spread across South Carolina.

Diversity Leadership Academy graduates are already having an impact in community activities. DLA graduates are participating in the all-volunteer Multi-Cultural Advisory Committee at Greenville Tech. This group is dedicated to addressing the diversity concerns and making improvement recommendations to the Greenville Tech board.

A second example involves Clemson University's ICAR. Here, another all-volunteer group of community leaders has been working with CU/ICAR management to increase the rate of inclusion of female and minority contractors in the construction of the CU/ICAR campus on I-85 in Greenville. Again, academy representatives are active in this effort.

Today in Greenville, when leaders come together to work on current community issues or to plan for the future, you will find graduates applying the lessons learned in the Diversity Leadership Academy. Their analysis and decision-making skills have universal applicability far beyond diversity matters.

For me, it is particularly rewarding to watch participants from very different backgrounds build solid relationships with one another during the class. They may be complete strangers before the academy experience but remain good friends long after graduation. This is a powerful personal benefit by any measure.

I am persuaded that we will be successful in improving South Carolina's economic competitiveness. I am convinced that to achieve this goal, we must improve the diversity landscape to fully include the talents and abilities of women and people of color. The Diversity Leadership Academy is a proven way to improve this landscape in South Carolina.
