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Furman Consortium Seeks to Attract and Retain Talent in State

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Benny Walker, Riley Institute

In today's ever-changing global business climate, savvy employers in every sector of industry and government are placing high value on employee diversity by pouring resources into policies and programs that strengthen and support the values of their employees' individuality. The U.S. has been called the leader in "cultural fusion" where the melting pot philosophy is admired and where one may assume that the country's diverse mix of cultures, races, gender and varying levels of self-expression within the workforce acts as the glue that holds the country together. Major American cities such as Chicago, New York and Los Angeles are known internationally as being hubs of innovation, creativity, economic opportunity and perhaps most importantly – for having a societal culture for inclusiveness with relation to difference. Each year, droves of bright, talented and educated prospective employees attempt to follow their dreams that lead to "bright lights and big cities" and the potential for economic sustainability in the pursuit of the American Dream. These energetic prospects are skill-equipped and ready to positively contribute to the bottom lines of the businesses they work for and to enhance the socio-economic conditions in their respective areas of residence. The marriage between the perfect candidates with the perfect jobs in the perfect city is a match made in economic heaven.

Of course not all regions in the U.S. are designed or suited to operate with the proposed "glitz and glamour" of major metropolitan areas and to that point, not every potential talent is attracted to that type of environment. Some job hopefuls may prefer a more relaxed lifestyle than that of a larger city such as a coastal community like Charleston or an atmosphere similar to the Greenville/Upstate area of the state where urban living is met on a smaller scale complete with a lower cost and less problems such as traffic congestion and crime typically associated with larger cities. Regardless of the attraction that a given area has for a job seeker, more and more corporations, business organizations, civic entities and regional conglomerates report finding themselves in the vying position for the acceptance and loyalty of potential workers. In this new atmosphere of job seeking it is a buyer's market for highly qualified candidates. What happens to a region's ability to compete when it has been stigmatized in a negative light for attitudes on diversity?

Researchers studying corporations and how they attract their recruits in South Carolina have found that the historic racial injustices associated with the state as well as several recent racially charged events have marred the image of the state in the eyes of would be implants from different regions of the country as well as the world. The perceptions of outdated racial policies, rumors of religious intolerance and statistics on economic and social disparities between the races within the state are reasons that high-skill level applicants have given after declining vacant positions.

For over a decade, Furman University's Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics, and Public Leadership has developed specific programs and services to address diversity in South Carolina. Most regional residents are familiar with the Diversity Leaders Initiative (DLI) where nearly 1,000 CEOs, mayors, city and county council members, legislators, school superintendents, religious leaders, non-profit heads, chamber of commerce directors, and community frontrunners graduated from the program. In keeping with the success of initiatives such as DLI, Furman officials and the Riley Institute have announced its newest enterprise developed to promote diversity within the area: the Diversity Recruitment Consortium (DRC). According to Benny Walker, special assistant to the president and senior associate of the Riley Institute, the Diversity Recruit Consortium will develop "tactical strategies" to support business organizations across the state that are committed to expanding their pool of recruits. Juan Johnson, senior fellow of the Riley Institute and former vice president for Diversity Strategies for the Coca-Cola Company, says that often when there are diversity problems in an organization or geographic region, it is because there is a lack of an "overarching strategic framework that clearly links diversity aspirations and initiatives to the organization's mission."

Organizations that will join the DRC are committed to integrating diversity into all levels of their organization for the good of the state. Johnson, Walker and other facilitators of Furman's DRC believe that councils and committees on diversity such as the DRC are effective resources in facilitating change for the state's image problem for diversity. The start of the DRC will be an intensive four day workshop series designed to identify and define opportunities and challenges related to attracting, developing and retaining diverse professionals and executives to the state. Procedures like the Diversity Recruitment Consortium are what Walker says will "make South Carolina a better state in which to work and live."

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