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Corporate Sponsorship of Programs to Recruit and Retain Students of Color: The CIGNA Scholars at the University of Richmond

Abstract

The University of Richmond, an institution with an under-represented minority student population, and the CIGNA Corporation created the CIGNA Scholars Program to recruit and retain students of color. This program, from inception to current activity, will be discussed in order to facilitate the creation of such programs at other institutions.

Dr. Akiba J. Covitz

Professor of Political Science and Public Law, and Special Assistant to the President, University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia

At nearly all of America's colleges and universities, diversity is seen as an important goal, although it is often relegated to one goal - and not the first - among many. In a world of competing goals and limited resources, then, diversity and the funds and energies necessary to create it where it does not exist are talked about but often not achieved. How can this problem be addressed?

At the University of Richmond, we entered into a partnership with a major corporation, CIGNA, to create the CIGNA Scholars Program. This program offers fifteen two-thirds scholarships each year to incoming students, for a total of sixty at the university. The competition for CIGNA Scholarships among incoming students of color is strong. These awards are renewable, upon satisfactory completion with a minimum of a 3.0 overall G.P.A. of each year of full-time undergraduate study, for four years. Five of each year's recipients are designated CIGNA Scholars in Science and are set aside for students who plan to major in biology, chemistry, computer science, mathematics, or physics. In addition, summer research funds provided by the university are made available to the CIGNA Scholars to encourage them to pursue independent research and/ or travel.

Once members of the CIGNA Scholars program a wide and strong support network is provided to the students. This network is constituted by fellow "Cignas;" a highly motivated administrative director in the Office of Multicultural Affairs; other staff members; and a number of dedicated faculty members and administrators across the curriculum and the university. Weekly programming, supported by CIGNA and university funds, brings leaders in the local, national, and international community of color to campus to meet with Cignas. Professional mentoring programs are also in place for those students who chose to pursue them. The CIGNA Corporation periodically sends representatives to campus to take part in recruitment, selection, and retention programs. CIGNA has also made a tradition of hiring a number of graduating Cignas each year for fast-track junior executive program at its corporate headquarters in Philadelphia.

Without this commitment from a prominent corporation, such dedication to increasing the number of students of color here at the University of Richmond would likely not have been possible, or it would have only been possible a number of years down the road, after other pressing priorities were addressed. CIGNA is obviously not unique in the corporate world in its interest in promoting diversity and in seeing to it that students of color are given the opportunity to pursue higher education. Many other companies have partnered with colleges and universities to create such programs, but this is still a highly under-utilized resource for the implementation and expansion of student recruitment programs. There are corporations across the country that, if properly approached and motivated, might well consider sponsoring such programs.

This presentation will outline the steps that were taken here at the University of Richmond that led to the creation of this prominent program. A model approach potentially applicable to a wide variety of educational institutions and corporations will be presented. Then, the structure and functioning of this program will be discussed. This will include how the program is linked to existing administrative structures on campus, from the admissions office to the president's office.

The ultimate goal of the presentation is to show how this academic-corporate partnership, if properly created, constructed, and maintained, can lead to increased recruitment as well as increased retention of students of color at America's colleges and universities. The presenter also hopes to learn from others how their corporate-sponsored programs work and don't work.

Presenter

Dr. Akiba Covitz holds degrees in law (from the Yale Law School) and constitutional history/political science (from the University of Pennsylvania).

He is new to the University of Richmond, where he teaches constitutional law, civil rights and civil liberties, and courses in American government. His previous position was at the Yale Law School.

In addition to his academic responsibilities, Dr. Covitz is Special Assistant to the President, specializing in student and external affairs. He serves as a member of the University's CIGNA Scholars Committee, recruiting, interviewing, and working closely with potential CIGNA Scholars as well as with those who are members of this well supported and close-knit group of students.

His research and publications cover such diverse areas as race and the law, affirmative action policies, the law and social change, the Fourth Amendment, attorney-client confidentiality, and law and economics.

This past academic year, his first full year at Richmond, he was voted Faculty Member of the Year by the students of Richmond College, and won numerous other campus-wide teaching and mentoring awards from a variety of student groups.