

## **The Importance of Building Diversity in Industry and Academia**

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I am grateful for the opportunity to join all of you this morning to help kick off Unisys' Diversity Week program. Increasing diversity in industry and academia must be among our highest priorities. This is not simply because it is a reasonable goal for AALANA (African American, Latin American, and Native American) and female populations in our companies and our universities to reflect regional and national demographics, although this is an important objective. It is also a matter of our future national economic survival. If the U.S. is to maintain and enhance its current standard of living in the new knowledge economy, American industry and our colleges and universities will need to expand opportunities for members of these historically under-represented groups if we are to have the trained workforce we will need in years to come. In addition, increasing the representation of these populations on our campuses and in our companies will also provide added value to all of our programs through the diverse experiences and insights that members of these population groups bring to our communities.

These conclusions probably seem self-evident to all of us here today, but there are other, more ominous, developments on the national and local scenes that make movement to a more inclusive America even more of an imperative. In our lifetimes, we have seen global competition force the virtual elimination of the kind of jobs in this country that once allowed hard-working individuals to support their families even if they did not have a college degree. Nowhere is this change more evident than in Rochester, where thousands of well-paying manufacturing jobs have been lost to global competition over the past three decades.

Individual success in America, therefore, increasingly means being able to contribute to a knowledge economy, and the earning of at least

an undergraduate degree is becoming more and more a requirement for meaningful, and gainful, employment here. Again, Rochester is a good example of how an educated workforce can respond positively to such corporate downsizing by major companies in the area. Through the efforts of many talented entrepreneurs in our midst, newer companies such as Paychex and Paetec have grown jobs in the region at a rate comparable to the rate at which we have lost them over the last few years. I am convinced, therefore, that Americans still have the fire and innovative spirit that made our country the envy of the world through the last century. I also believe that we in America can sustain and enhance our standard of living as long as we can produce the educated workforce that the new knowledge economy requires. That, however, is a pretty big “if”. For, over the last few decades, demographic shifts in our population have resulted in increasing percentages of college-age men and women from groups that have not historically gone to college in great numbers. Here, two specific examples will suffice to make the point. First, in 2002, there were more African-American men in prison than in college. Second, by the year 2020, there will be 50 million Latino/Latina Americans in the U.S., and the college-going rate of this population is less than 10% - the lowest of any of our ethnic minority groups. Clearly, reversing these two trends must be among our highest priorities if we are to have the workforce we will need to sustain our economy in the future.

At RIT, we are confronting these challenges, but the going has not been, and will not be, easy. Although we have been able to recruit a more diverse faculty on our campus over the past few years (about 30% of our faculty hires over this period have been people of color), we have had less success in diversifying our staff and student bodies. In fact, the percentage of students from the AALANA populations at RIT has remained constant at about 13% for the past four years, although the actual numbers of AALANA students have grown as the campus has increased its enrollment during this period. In order to significantly increase these numbers, we will have to commit much more financial aid per student than we have in the past to address the needs of so many

students in these populations who come from financially challenged backgrounds.

I am very impressed that Unisys would devote a week to diversity issues within the corporation. I would encourage you to think during this week about ways in which we might work together to provide opportunities to young people of color and women who aspire to live the American dream. This is not a task we can assign to our local diversity officer and expect to be successful. All of us, in our own way, will have to find ways of addressing these challenges. We all need, in the end, to be accountable to each other to ensure that our country makes the transition from euro-centric population to a no-majority population successfully.

Now in case you are doubtful of whether you alone or we, working together, can make a real difference, I would tell you the story of my late father, Chester McArthur Destler, an American historian of some note. When I was a young man in high school, I took an interest in the civil rights movement of the 1960's and began to work in downtown Hartford, CT, tutoring young African American and Hispanic school children. At one point, frustrated at how big the challenge seemed and how few people seemed to be working toward real solutions, I asked my father what he had ever done to promote equal opportunity in this country. He didn't say a word at the time, but I later learned from another source that he had been fired by the University of Georgia in the late 1930's for advocating the admission of African Americans. His career suffered as a result, as back in that era a reputation for being troublesome could be had quite easily and could be difficult to shake, but he eventually went on to teach at Yale and Cornell, among other institutions. I guess if I learned anything from that experience, it was that individuals *can* make a difference and that just because someone isn't bragging about their contributions doesn't mean that they aren't making any. I think it was Mark Twain who said that parents get a lot smarter as their children get older.

Surely, diversity in the U.S. is as much a strength of this great country as it is a challenge, and I, for one, hope that the gains to be had from a diverse population will overwhelm the challenges. Let's work together to make it so. Thanks for the opportunity to join you today.