

Forum

SSM HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

Fostering Workplace Diversity

In 1990 the board of directors of the St. Louis-based SSM Health Care System passed a resolution committing the organization to increase gender and ethnic diversity among system executives. The resolution called on presidents at SSM facilities to "identify the executive level vacancies which have been filled and provide evidence of increased diversity and outline steps taken to improve ethnic diversity in managerial levels." It also directed that executive position candi-

dates be sought "from colleges, training programs, and geographical locations where people of ethnic diversity are seeking executive opportunities."

MULTIFACETED APPROACH

In response to the resolution, SSM adopted a multifaceted approach to removing barriers that deny women and minorities access to leadership positions and developing programs that assist existing women and minor-

ity staff at all levels. It included:

- A commitment to seek diversified groups of candidates for key managerial positions.

- An effort to locate search firms with special skills to ensure gender and ethnic diversity among executive-level job candidates.

- Follow-up monitoring of search firms' performance to determine which were effective in locating appropriate candidates.

- A three-year execu-

tive trainee program for women and ethnic minority persons who are graduating from professional master's degree programs. (The program is not intended as a "fellowship"; rather, it leads to a career position within the system.)

- A training program for 75 system executives concerning gender and ethnic issues, included as part of a two-day workshop on executive development.

- An annual survey of all system hospitals and other campuses to obtain data regarding diversity at all organizational levels. This was an expanded version of a survey that collected data to demonstrate compliance with federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission requirements.

- Regular discussions among campus presidents and system executives on how to incorporate in strategic and financial plans operating objectives that advance diversity principles.

EXECUTIVE HIRING

The board's resolution reinforced a longstanding commitment to promote gender and ethnic diversity among SSM executives. In 1990, 32 percent of the system's executives were women, com-

pared with only 12 percent of the membership of the American College of Healthcare Executives. In 1991, 7 of the 15 new administrative council positions were filled by women, one of whom was Hispanic. This amounted to a 22.5 percent increase over the previous year in the number of women senior executives at SSM and shifted the overall composition of the executive team to 36 percent women.

The system's emphasis on promoting greater diversity among executives was evident at every stage of the hiring process. Although no system upper management or campus president positions came open in 1991, the turnover rate for other executive positions was 12 percent. Of the 54 finalists interviewed for positions, 26 were women and 4 were minorities; 8 of the 15 new executives came from outside the system.

In 1992, 6 of 11 new executives in SSM Health Care System were women, increasing the proportion of women in these positions to 39 percent. One of the new system executives was an African-American man. The overall executive turnover rate fell from 12 percent to 8 per-



Master Affiliation Agreement

In 1992 SSM Health Care System and Saint Louis University, St. Louis, signed an agreement that lays the foundation for increased collaboration between the two organizations.

According to William C. Schoenhard, SSM executive vice president and chief operating officer, a primary purpose of the agreement was to clarify "the overall future intent of how the entities would collaborate." Following the agreement, St. Mary's Health Center, St. Louis—a member of the SSM Health Care System—announced it would be headquarters for obstetrics and gynecology services, education, and research provided by Saint Louis University School of Medicine.

Schoenhard stresses that the agreement does not address "specific programmatic linkages" between SSM entities and the university but is more like "a statement of strategic vision, announcing an intent to work even closer together." The idea to pursue the arrangement grew out of an internal strategic assessment of SSM's future ministry, on the basis of which system leaders determined they would like to strengthen ties to Saint Louis University's medical school. One key benefit to both parties is that the agreement "removes all doubt" about each organization's future cooperative efforts, Schoenhard says.

Schoenhard expects to see increased discussions regarding collaborative programs in graduate medical education and allied health education. He also expects various SSM entities to look into how they might work with the university to develop community service programs.

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ORGANIZATIONAL INITIATIVES

SSM's commitment to enhancing gender and ethnic diversity has not been limited to executive development and recruitment. To advance appreciation of gender and cultural diversity, various SSM campuses have, as appropriate, taken the following steps:

- Recruited diverse voluntary advisory and development board members

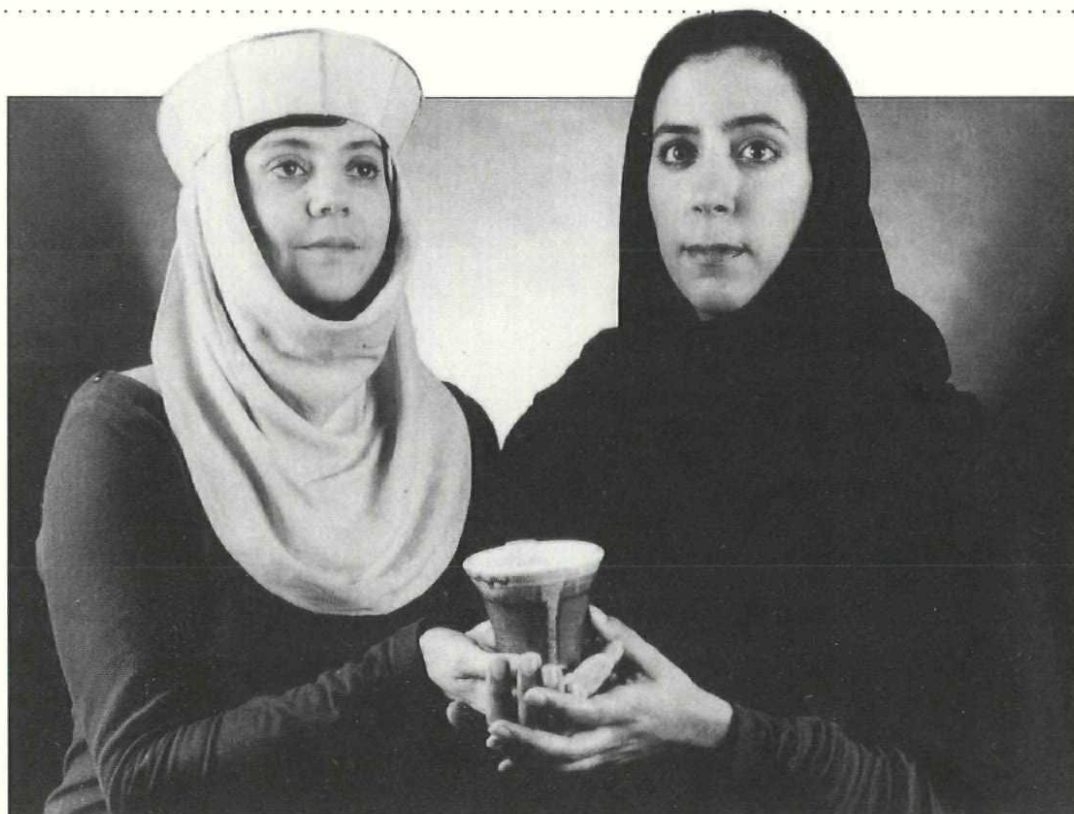
- Sponsored performances of *All That I Am*, a play that depicts the treatment of women throughout Church history, with a sensitivity to how they were taken for granted or mistreated

- Called for the use of inclusive language (e.g., avoid using "he" for physicians and "she" for nurses) by leaders and in written communications to reinforce an attitude of openness to all people

- Created opportunities to appreciate other cultural traditions around holidays (e.g., encouraging different religious observations, offering ethnic foods in the cafeteria)

- Developed educational programs that affirm the value of diversity in the organizational culture

In addition to addressing these issues, SSM has instituted formal mechanisms and established ongoing



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practices that promote increased workplace gender and ethnic diversity. The system now directs campus presidents to include goals for enhancing diversity in their annual performance plan. In addition, the diversity issue is part of the agenda for quarterly meetings of campus presidents, as well as for annual meetings of nurse and human resource executives. Finally, efforts to foster diversity have an important place in the system's strategic and financial plans and documents.

In responding to these system initiatives, campus presidents have raised a number of questions to help focus on critical diversity issues. These

include:

- Do tuition reimbursement programs, which often help established professionals gain advanced degrees, also help persons with literacy problems or a need for technical training for entry-level work?

- Do institutional newsletters and publications celebrate the accomplishments of women and men—including minorities—throughout the organization?

- Does the organization employ large numbers of persons with minority backgrounds in entry-level positions—and maybe even some at senior levels—but none at the first-line supervisory or professional level?

- Do healthcare ex-

ecutives openly advocate gender and ethnic diversity in their professional and community organizations? Do they avoid joining clubs where only white men or members of certain religions are welcome?

- Do institutional ties exist with high schools, including inner-city schools, to expose a wide number of young persons to opportunities in health-care employment?

A FITTING PLACE

In its efforts to foster workplace diversity,

each SSM campus has had to consider its unique nature as a community, the talents and proclivities of its leaders and employees. The workplace diversity project has also required an ongoing commitment to improve managers' and executives' understanding of key issues and an ability to fine tune programs as the need arises. The program's goal has been to create an organization where each diverse gift, each diverse human being, finds a fitting place.

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