

Diversity Schooled in Diversity

Diversity Symposium serves as a template for other institutions' diversity efforts.

By Patricia Andrews Keenan

Vision, coupled with action, can change the world. And that's how the **University of Chicago** created its **Business Diversity Professional Services Symposium**, melding a vision with action and bringing the event to fruition. Now in its sixth year, the Symposium, created by **Nadia M. Quarles**, assistant vice president for business diversity at the University of Chicago, connects minority and women-owned professional services firms to key decision-makers at the institution. To date, the University has forged business partnerships with more than 40 firms in the financial, legal, human resources, IT, architecture, and communications sectors.

The vision for the Symposium was provided in part by **John W. Rogers, Jr.**, CEO of **Ariel Investments** and a University trustee. He believed that successful business diversity programs could extend beyond contracting for janitorial services or advertising specialties. Rogers's vision meshed with that of Quarles, who also saw this as an opportunity to improve on the institution's diversity initiatives. Their insights created a light-bulb moment for University President **Robert J.**



Nadia M. Quarles, speaks during the Pre-Symposium meeting at the University of Chicago.

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Zimmer. "The program improves the University's business practices by bringing a diverse set of talents to the institution," he says.

Quarles reasoned that professional services drive the economy, pay the highest wages, and will ultimately hire many of the University's graduates. Rogers and Quarles knew that, traditionally, these were areas where women and minorities experienced the most difficulty securing contracts, so purposeful outreach would be needed to create success both for the vendors and the University.

A lawyer by training, Quarles sources the firms that appear at the Symposium by attending various conferences and business events throughout the year. "Key for us is sourcing

businesses that will be a great fit for the University and meet the needs of the VPs that hire in these areas," she says. Quarles regularly attends forums locally and nationally, including those held by the **Women's Business Development Center (WBDC)**, **Chicago Minority Supplier Development Council (Chicago MSDC)**, and less familiar groups such as the **National Association of Securities Professionals (NASP)**. This "pre-vetting" process helps set the companies and the University up for success. A maximum of nine firms within each category are invited to participate in the annual Symposium, which is held over two days.

Even before the invited participants assemble, minority and women-owned businesses perform significant work in support of the program. For example, **Strategic Events Solutions, Inc.**, a minority-owned Chicago-based event and meeting planning firm, does behind-the-scenes tasks. Day one of the Symposium allows participants to hear directly from the AVPs on the operation of their departments and the types of opportunities they are sourcing. This

is an interactive forum, with firms encouraged to ask questions that will help them better prepare for the presentations that will be held on day two.

The first day ends with a reception that brings together University personnel, Symposium presenters, and all



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Left to right: **Rosa Gumataotao Rios**, Treasurer of the United States; **John W. Rogers, Jr.**, CEO, Ariel Investments and University Trustee and **Nadia M. Quarles** at the 6th Annual Professional Services Symposium Networking Reception.

of the Symposium participants since the program's inception. This presents an opportunity for the senior leaders at the University to network and build sustainable relationships with minority- and women-owned firms in a relaxed setting, permitting "purposeful networking" that can also lead to business opportunities. During the reception, guests hear from Zimmer, the trustees, and program participants who have secured contracts with the University.

At the first Symposium in 2009, Zimmer remarked on the quality of the businesses represented, and the excitement and energy of the entire gathering. By the end, he had decided that the Symposium would become an annual event. Illinois Governor **Pat Quinn**, who has attended since its inception, has called the Symposium a model for colleges across the state.

So if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then the University has much to be proud of: Since 2012, administrators at **Northwestern University** and the **University of**

Illinois have held symposiums modeled closely after the University of Chicago's, with Quarles advising them on event planning. Quarles also has had discussions with **DePaul University** and **Loyola University**, as well as the **Art Institute of Chicago**, about launching similar programs on their campuses.

The "meat and potatoes" of the Symposium occurs on day two, when participants present their capabilities to AVPs and their teams. The daylong process is rigorous and exacting.

"We were pleased to be selected as a partner to the University and have worked on a number of assignments with them that have been very successful," says **Derrick Buckingham**, senior vice president and managing director of the **Hollins Group**, an executive search firm selected to partner with the University in 2009. "This program has opened doors for our firm and allowed us to secure repeat business from one of the most elite universities in the country."

Hollins Group is among the 48 companies that have secured contracts with the University since the program's inception. Of note are advertising contracts with **Ebony** and **Black Enterprise**, accounting services from the venerable Chicago firm **Washington, Pittman, McKeever**, and financial management services from **Holland Capital** and **Ernest Partners**, the first minority-owned firms to invest in the University's sizable endowment. Having the University of Chicago as a client has helped firms secure other new business;

Buckingham says the Hollins Group has been able to expand its higher education practice because of the work the company has done with the University. Further, Quarles says that the University has, in turn, served as a reference for their partners, helping them generate new business.

While not every firm that participates in the Symposium is selected to partner with the University immediately, the school has a pool of candidates to choose from for future assignments.

"I can't overemphasize the work that Nadia has put into this program, and how the University has avoided the trap of talking about business diversity, yet doing nothing to make it happen," Buckingham says. "Nadia and the University are about more than just talking a good game. And I applaud her determination in pulling this program together."

Quarles thinks they have a viable, scalable template with the Symposium, but she's proudest of the fact that the University's focus has shifted from supplier diversity to overall business diversity. "Diversifying our relationships is a business imperative," she says, "and it is slowly being ingrained throughout the institution." ♦

Patricia Andrews-Keenan is a communications executive with extensive corporate communications, public relations and community affairs experience. She formed the boutique communications firm **The Tallulah Group** in 2008 with a focus on media and public relations, communications and



community outreach.

She holds a degree in Journalism from Grambling State University.