

INSIDE THE BAR: it is time to mentor women and minorities

The 2008 Diversity Counsel Program speakers in Milwaukee on June 6 were from diverse backgrounds, but their messages were strikingly similar. The face of America is changing, and to be successful, law firms and legal professionals must change how they do business. Law firms must mentor and advance talented people of diverse backgrounds. Lawyers of diverse backgrounds must find firms that make that commitment and must not be afraid to step up and find their voice.

Luncheon keynote speaker Juan Williams, senior NPR correspondent and Fox News political analyst, told more than 140 attorneys, judges, and law students that it is important to open the door and give women and minorities the chance to succeed. "When it comes to managing partners and equity partners, women still make up only 3 percent; and when it comes to equity partners, 1 percent.

"Immigrant families have a higher number of children of any group in the country, and in some of the bigger cities those young people represent 50 percent of the population," he said. "This will have a tremendous effect on the future of the workforce. We are in the midst of a tremendous transition.

"It is time to mentor women and minorities, time to let them take on serious challenging cases," said Williams. "It is time to stop giving the challenging cases to the associates that look like the managing partners. Law firms must be able to walk the walk to satisfy their increasingly diverse client base, especially their corporate client bases, who want to work with law firms that reflect the face of America."

Shirley Wilcher, executive director, American Association for Affirmative Action, said, "The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2050, 47 percent of all Americans will be Hispanic, African American, and Asian. These changing demographics make it more important to recruit, maintain, and manage a diverse workforce. In many law firms the issue is not finding people of diverse background, it's getting them to stay.

"We need focus on widening the net to include everyone who is qualified," she said. "We must encourage all of our companies and professions to make way for all to participate. America is ready for change and for social and economic equity."

The Diversity Counsel Program is presented annually by the Diversity Outreach Committee. The committee seeks to foster a racially and ethnically diverse State Bar and a legal profession that is conscious of differences, that is committed to valuing those differences, and that is committed to ensuring equality while also valuing commonalities.

The program was presented in collaboration with the Association of Corporate Counsel, Wisconsin Chapter.

Source: State Bar of Wisconsin