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BIRSE TIMMONS, GRADUATE OF TUSKEGEE UNIVERSITY

Education, business leaders seek diversified workforce

Historically Black Colleges and Universities alumni say they can help make connections locally

By CLAIRE BESSETTE
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Birse Timmons and Ray Malone know firsthand how active recruiting and nurturing of minority employees can be successful and help businesses and government entities boost diversity of their workforces.

The two engineers, graduates of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, were recruited by the Defense Department through a 1970s-era program to hire and nurture engineers. Both have had successful careers at what is now the Naval Undersea Warfare Center, formerly in New London and now in Newport.

"They saw a need for minorities in the engineering field," said Timmons, who grew up in Montville and earned an engineering degree at Tuskegee University in Alabama and is now a division head of engineering at NUWC.

Malone grew up in the Bronx, N.Y., and graduated from North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro. He too moved to the

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Alumni of historically black colleges trying to help

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area to work at the then-Naval Underwater Systems Center in New London. He lives in Portsmouth, R.I., and is retired.

"A number of African Americans in the area came from the HBCUs to work in the Navy," Malone said. "It was a small number percentage-wise, but it was a good number."

Mark Hill, president and CEO of the Eastern Workforce Investment Board, said now is the time for businesses to diversify their workforces.

"Strategically at the highest level, we're still on the verge of a mass exodus in the workforce of the Baby Boomer generation," Hill said. "Putting together good strategies for all recruitment is critical."

Hill works with businesses on their workforce needs and forms partnerships with schools, colleges and training programs. Hill said forming partnerships with local agencies that serve minority populations has proved successful for the group.

The pipeline started four years ago to attract students and workers to advanced training programs. More than 9,000 people have enrolled. He did not have statistics but said minority recruitment is higher than the national average for such programs.

Hill said EWIB works with agencies in Norwich, New London, Groton and Windham to publicize the training program among minorities. Hill said companies need to make those connections and offer strong mentoring so new workers can advance.

"Any employer, you have to show people there's opportunity to grow, learn more things," Hill said.

Timmons and Malone are members of the New London County HBCU Alumni Association, which runs annual tours for local students to explore HBCUs in mid-Atlantic and southern states. Alumni members said last week they could help local employers trying to diversify workforces.

"A lot of companies in the New London area, some of the big companies, are probably not recruiting at the HBCUs," association Vice President Malone said. "And students at the HBCUs are probably not hearing about the jobs in this area."

Alumni Association President Voulse Fonville of Uncasville, a graduate of Winston-Salem State University and retired state social worker, said the alumni association could connect businesses with HBCU career and academic leaders.

That effort has started. This year's student bus tour was canceled because of the coronavirus, but a New London school district human resources official had planned to join the tour to make connections, Fonville said.

Norwich Superintendent Kristen Stringfellow also is interested in working with the alumni association. Stringfellow included HBCUs in her strategic plan to diversify the city school district's employment.

"We will more greatly develop our recruitment strategies by establishing partnerships with historically black colleges and teacher/leader preparation programs with a focus on educators of color," Stringfellow wrote in her plan.

Tina Collins, New London personnel administrator, a graduate of an HBCU, said New London Mayor Michael Passero has made it his mission to hire a diverse workforce. The city is doing outreach with New London High School and local churches to spread the word on the benefits of city employment. She said she has found that having a diverse workforce is an invaluable asset in her career.

"It is the city's desire to retain all of our staff through continuing to provide competitive salary and benefits for comparative municipalities while also providing opportunities for advancement and personal growth," Collins said.

Recruiting and hiring people of color is just the beginning, Fonville and other advocates said last week. New employees need training, nurturing and advancement. Attracting students from the South to cold-weather New England with its high cost of living is a challenge.

Timmons said the opportunity he was given long ago has had long-lasting results. As a manager, he is "in the room where it happens," quoting the Broadway hit "Hamilton," making recruiting decisions.

"I am able to be in the room when we're making decisions on where we're going to recruit and who we are going to hire," Timmons said. "If you don't have someone in the room to say, 'Hey, what about this school? Recruit from there,' you're missing those opportunities."

Timmons said a North Carolina A&T State dean of engineering once told him, "If you want to harvest the fruit, you have to feed the roots." Employers need to invest in the colleges directly with research grants, student scholarships and internship partnerships.

"You see a lot more of that in traditionally white colleges," Timmons said.

Shiela Hayes, president of the Norwich NAACP and longtime education advocate, said local employers should concentrate on recruiting and nurturing local students of color at local colleges. Local students know the region and the cost of living and have families and friends here.

Hayes said a state program to recruit minority students interested in teaching was working fine until the state stopped funding it two years ago. Norwich Free Academy at one time had about 20 students in the program, she said. They attended in-state colleges, volunteered in local schools and worked with youths in summer to get first-hand experience.

Hayes said she was frustrated when the program ended, especially when the state Department of Education then announced a goal of hiring 250 new teachers, with 30% being Black males.

LEARN, the southeastern Connecticut Regional Educational Services Center, has been working to increase teacher diversity for years, said Ellen Dalton, education coordinator and co-chairwoman of the minority teacher recruitment and retention consortium. The state's six regional educational service centers have committees and send representatives to a state committee, Dalton said.

Locally, New London schools have the highest percentage of minority certified staff at 19%, followed by LEARN schools at 11%, Norwich Free Academy, 9%, Groton schools, 9%, and Norwich, 3%. Small school districts have less than 2% minority certified staff, Dalton said.

Strategic School Profiles on file at the state Department of Education showed 82.2% of students in New London public schools were students of color in 2019-20, 70% of Norwich public school students, 47.6% of Norwich Free Academy and 47.3% of Groton public school students.

Jamal Davis, assistant principal at Groton Middle School, co-facilitator at LEARN and co-chairman of the Groton Town Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee, said all schools, not just urban districts, need diverse staff.

Teachers of color provide role models for students in their classes. They challenge and motivate students of color academically and to take more advanced classes to prepare for college and careers, Davis said. White students benefit by seeing people of color in professional leadership positions.

"Being an educator of color, a Black male," Davis said, "when I'm in the classroom, I'm constantly thinking about how I can support not only the students, but the teachers on how these students do bring value to the classroom and how do we harness that. I'm going to be bringing those expectations to the forefront."

Susan Iwanicki, director of curriculum and instruction at LEARN and co-chair woman of the agency's minority recruitment committee, said there are problems and biases with the hiring process. Even when top qualified candidates were recruited, including from Howard University, a top HBCU school, they were not hired.

Dalton said the effort doesn't stop at hiring. More teachers of color have become certified, but not many stayed in Connecticut. She said there was no tracking on where they went.

Groton Town Manager John Burt has very few employees of color and has difficulty recruiting. The town Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee, established three years ago, expanded to about 40 people. The town posts jobs with the NAACP, Hispanic groups and churches.

"We've done all that, and we're not getting a great deal of new applicants," Burt said. "We're trying to get face-to-face interactions."

HBCU Alumni Association member Keith Fowler of Gales Ferry, a veterinarian graduate of Tuskegee University working at Bristol-Myers Squibb, suggested local employers meet with the alumni association to make connections with local students who have gone on the HBCU bus tours.

"That's where it could start," Fowler said. "People reaching out to businesses and the schools. Get everyone together for a simple meeting. Let's see what are the companies' needs and take that information and see how would that fit in terms of doing a search of past graduates who went on the tour, even if they didn't go to HBCU."

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