

# The Value of the Diversity Conference to the State Bar

by Providence Napoleon

The VSB has asked for public comment on the proposal to fund its Diversity Conference. The bar's three other conferences — Young Lawyer's Conference, Senior Lawyer's Conference, and Conference of Local Bar Associations — are each fully funded by the VSB. The Diversity Conference, in existence since 2010, has never received any funding from the VSB. We believe that the time has come.

Notwithstanding all of the strides towards inclusion in this country, the lack of minority representation in the law is striking. According to 2014 US Census data, 62 percent of our country's population was white, 13 percent was black, and 17 percent was Hispanic, with the most significant growth coming in minority populations. By contrast, the legal profession has been significantly slower than other professions in recognizing that confidence in institutions goes up when the face of those who serve reflects the face of those who are served.

A 2013 Microsoft-funded study, "Raising the Bar: Exploring the Diversity Gap Within the Legal Profession," states:

By 2042, the U.S. population is projected to be "majority minority," and no one race or ethnicity will any longer be the majority in America. While America increasingly reflects the extraordinarily diverse people and cultures from around the world, the legal profession does not.

The study goes on to compare diversity in the legal profession with three other professions with broad education or licensing requirements: physicians and surgeons, financial managers, and accountants/auditors. Although the percentage of minorities in each of these professions lags behind the national workforce, the gap between the legal profession and these other professions has actually worsened over the past decade. In other words, our legal

profession lags behind professions who already lag behind.

Beyond the demographic underrepresentation, the Virginia Supreme Court has stated in *Va. Sup. Ct. R. pt. 6, sec. IV, 9 (i)* that the State Bar "Council shall have general charge of the administration of the affairs of the Virginia State Bar, and shall have the power:...(i) To encourage and promote diversity in the profession and the judiciary."

By funding the Diversity Conference, the VSB can carry out its charge of encouraging and promoting diversity in the profession and the judiciary, and the Diversity Conference can be on equal footing in continuing the solid work it has begun. Key projects of the Diversity Conference include a variety of initiatives aimed at building a pipeline of excellence:

- Annual Meeting Mentoring Program. High potential, minority law students were identified by each of Virginia's eight law schools to attend the 2015 VSB Annual Meeting (sponsored by individual donations). These future lawyers were mentored during the three-day meeting by some of Virginia's best attorneys, as they attended educational sessions and networking events. Through this experience, these young people experienced what it means to be a Virginia attorney.
- Oliver Hill/Samuel Tucker Institute. Up to fifty high school students from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds participate in an annual summer program that introduces future lawyers to the legal profession and gives them the opportunity to meet distinguished members of the bench and bar.
- Diversity in the Law Program. This session, developed for presentation at law schools, covers unique issues in representing diverse client bases.

- Rule of Law. The Diversity Conference has collaborated on Rule of Law/Students' Law Day at the Capitol Program in Richmond each spring, as well as partnered with the Center for Teaching the Rule of Law in presenting a CLE titled *Forging in the Foundry of Justice: The Rule of Law for We the People*.
- Award-Winning CLE presentations at the VSB Annual Meeting:

- 2013: *Diversity and the Rule of Law: Complementary or Contradictory*
- 2014: *Marriage in Virginia, the Changing Status of Same-Sex Couples and their Families*
- 2015: *Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People*
- And coming in 2016: *The Economics of Diversity: Value-Added to the 21st Century Practice of Law*. Presenters from large corporations, large and small law firms, and legal education leaders will speak about the clear business case for diversity in the practice of law.

The Diversity Conference will continue its work to build coalitions within the commonwealth, making our bench and our bar stronger by increasing the diversity in our profession.

Please take a moment to write in support of funding the Diversity Conference. Send comments to [PublicComment@VSB.org](mailto:PublicComment@VSB.org).

It is time that the Diversity Conference had a fully-funded seat at the VSB table. With your support, it can.



Providence Napoleon is 2015–16 chair of the Diversity Conference