

Three Major Steps Toward Inclusion and Racial Equality in A/E/C

By Asheya L. Warren, CPSM



Established almost one year ago, the SMPS Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Task Force has been hard at work. Thirty SMPS members from across the country have met monthly to define DEI objectives for the organization and identify gaps and opportunities for the Society and A/E/C industries.

We quickly recognized that because of the specialized role of marketers and business development professionals within A/E/C firms, SMPS and our members have a unique opportunity to shift the direction of inclusion within our firms and truly transform business through marketing leadership. This reach can include project teams, representation within organizations, alignment with HR for recruitment and retention efforts, and influencing corporate culture.

With that as our guiding light, the DEI Task Force has made major strides over the past 11 months.

SMPS Diversity Philosophy & Policy

One area of significant focus for the task force was redeveloping and restructuring the outdated 2003 diversity statement. Through considerable discussion, collaboration, and discourse, we determined that mere words would not sufficiently shift the organization's culture. Instead, the task force concentrated on developing a philosophy statement that would define and drive how SMPS will

embrace, cultivate, and encourage inclusion and allyship within the A/E/C industries.

The SMPS Diversity Philosophy & Policy provides a foundation for how we view and value our members and participating firms, while acknowledging the significant amount of work ahead to create an inclusive, equitable A/E/C community.

We know that words on a page are meaningless without supportive and measurable action. Therefore, we structured the philosophy statement with essential action items and initiatives.

Together, these form the basis for the new DEI page on the SMPS website ([smeps.org/dei](https://www.smeps.org/dei)), which provides tools for chapter leaders and A/E/C firms. The page outlines the task force's comprehensive action plan and includes lists of completed items, immediately actionable items, efforts underway, and industry-impacting efforts. SMPS is committed to regularly updating these actions with new and ongoing inclusion efforts.

We know that organizations are comprised of human beings with varying experiences and perspectives, and that to truly cultivate transformative change, we must also address the individual. The new webpage provides various resources for those interested in broadening their perspectives, eliminating blind spots, and encouraging empathy. By offering a three-prong approach of resources for Society

SMPS Diversity Philosophy & Policy

SMPS recognizes, respects, and values the dignity of all people. We are united in our stance against all forms of injustice and inequity. SMPS commits to actively champion diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within our organization, the firms we represent, the communities we serve, and the A/E/C industries. We are intentionally working to increase participation in our organization and the A/E/C industries by underrepresented groups; advocate for recruitment and retention of professionals of all backgrounds by creating inclusive and welcoming environments; and promote equality and opportunities for advancement in the Society and industry overall. Together, we can transform our businesses, enhance membership experiences, and influence change in our communities.

We recognize that our diversity is reflected by our different people and firms. We believe our varying ethnicities, cultures, genders, sexual orientations, ages, levels of experiences, physical abilities, and other differences benefit us as individuals and as an organization. In SMPS, we will organize and promote programs and activities that espouse our beliefs and increase awareness, understanding, recruitment, and participation of diverse persons and firms.



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leaders, firm/business professionals, and individuals, the Society can help promote allyship through education and work towards dismantling institutional and structural inequities in our industries.

HBCU Engagement and Scholarship

As the DEI Task Force continued identifying priorities and developing objectives, it became apparent that part of our lack of diversity was due to the pipeline of opportunities within the A/E/C industries. The task force identified that the Society's level of representation is symptomatic and reflective of the A/E/C industries overall.

However, we also acknowledged the unique opportunity that professional services marketing and business development provides, particularly in terms of on-ramps into careers in A/E/C. One noted gap was the engagement and outreach effort targeting historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Though HBCUs represent 3% of the country's colleges and universities, they produce 20% of all African American college graduates. Most of them have never heard of professional services marketing or recognize the plethora of meaningful career opportunities available in our industries.

Students from across the country intentionally seek enrollment in HBCUs for the nurturing, unique, and culturally

immersive educational settings these institutions provide. The opportunity to engage with students with varying perspectives, experiences, and thought processes will help the next generation of A/E/C professionals lead with equity. This matters for the industries because, according to Deloitte research,¹ inclusive and diverse organizations see increased business performance in terms of ability to innovate (83% improvement), responsiveness to changing customer needs (31% improvement), and team collaboration (42% improvement).

SMPS co-founder and member number one, Andy Zinsmeyer, recognized the lack of representation in SMPS membership and challenged the organization to make a concerted effort to increase outreach efforts to diversify the membership and increase opportunities for minorities in professional services marketing. A generous donation to the SMPS Foundation backed his charge, enabling the task force to develop the Society's inaugural HBCU scholarship fund.

SMPS has organized the SMPS Foundation Andy Zinsmeyer Scholarship to benefit African American students enrolled at HBCUs who are majoring in architecture, construction management, engineering, journalism, public relations, and mass communications. To build awareness and provide exposure to the A/E/C industries and professional services marketing, \$25,000 has been

From the Desk of the CEO: Our Progress

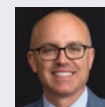
For nearly 50 years, SMPS has been committed to the personal and professional growth of our members. Through educational and networking events, publications, and more, we provide a community for people to connect and learn from each other.

As this organization has matured, our thinking has developed as well, and we recognize SMPS needs to be more than a resource and think tank of marketing strategies. As community and organization evolves, we also need to learn *about* each other.

I commend and point you to the great work of our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Task Force, led by Asheya L. Warren, CPSM, and SMPS CFO and DEI advocate, Antonio Payne, CPA. The task force was appointed last year when the board of directors made the public commitment for SMPS to "actively champion DEI within our organization, the firms we represent, the communities we serve, and the architecture/engineering/construction (A/E/C) industries."

It's been almost a year since we formally started our work, and we've accomplished a lot. We launched a scholarship fund, started to develop resources, and identified partner organizations, among efforts underway. For a full review, please visit our new webpage, smps.org/dei.

I'm grateful for the commitment made by our leaders, task force, members, and staff. Together, we're going to make a difference in the greater society, and in this Society, too. ■



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allocated to the scholarship fund. In addition to tuition support, scholarship recipients will also receive mentorship, SMPS student membership, and access to SMPS programming.

Administered by the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), the scholarship applications will be accepted through September 1, 2021. Recipients will be selected based on need in addition to merit. The scholarship also aligns with the areas of impact identified by the task force by targeting the A/E/C industries at large and engaging the next generation of professionals. We recognize that we can help pique the interest in professional services marketing and other roles throughout A/E/C by providing direct exposure, access, and support.

Kanarys Strategic Partnership

The task force also identified another significant gap in developing a DEI strategy: data and demographic information. Historically, SMPS has only obtained gender and career length as demographic metrics. While these data points have provided insights into gender dynamics within A/E/C organizations, they don't reveal or address racial, ethnic, or orientation sentiments, nor do they sufficiently acknowledge the issues of intersectionality and varying experiences that an individual may encounter during their career.

SMPS is uniquely positioned across A/E/C disciplines and, as such, has a remarkable opportunity to lead the industry in prioritizing DEI initiatives. We also recognize that though we are

comprised of skilled marketers and business development professionals, obtaining targeted DEI data analytics requires additional support.

To that end, we're excited to announce a strategic partnership with Kanarys, a technology-based DEI data company. Their platform provides data and benchmarking tools to help create equitable workplaces by gathering and leveraging meaningful DEI data. In collaboration with Kanarys, SMPS will leverage the company's proprietary software to complete organizational assessments of our membership and the industries at large.

This necessary data acquisition will inform the task force's next steps; identify gaps; and enable us to strategically plan, educate, and program future DEI initiatives for SMPS and the A/E/C industries. These efforts will also help define policies and training needed for Society leaders and staff.

In addition to working with SMPS to obtain critically necessary data, Kanarys will also provide strategic DEI resources for SMPS and A/E/C firms to create a more inclusive community, where individuals can bring their whole selves to work. This data-driven approach will help us articulate the business case for equity and inclusion specifically for the A/E/C industries.

While the work of the task force in terms of committing to equity and inclusion will never be done, we recognize that across disciplines and throughout the A/E/C industries, efforts are underway to collectively improve the level of DEI conversations, engagement, representation, allyship, and understanding.

The American Institute of Architects and Urban Land Institute are increasing their efforts to provide programming, access, and outreach to address disparities in architecture and planning. Several national general contractors have collaboratively

established a consortium to plan the first Construction Inclusion Week, October 18–22, 2021. SMPS is excited to participate and will share content and utilize the conversation guides to facilitate staff dialogue; chapter leaders and member firms will be encouraged to follow suit.

We're also excited to host our first virtual DEI Townhall on September 15 at 3 pm ET. Please join us by signing up through smps.org/dei.

SMPS, as an organization, can lead the charge by serving as a bridge connecting disciplines and driving transformational change from the inside out. We can influence business development, project teams, recruiting and retention, and provide nontechnical opportunities for career development and community impact.

The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force is excited about the progress we've made and will continue to work towards dismantling racism, creating a culture of inclusion for the Society and industries, and continuing to cultivate allies throughout the A/E/C community. ■



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Resources

¹ "Waiter, is that inclusion in my soup? A new recipe to improve business performance," Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission, Deloitte Australia. May 2013.

deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/human-capital/deloitte-au-hc-diversity-inclusion-soup-0513.pdf