Advertising Industry Diversity: We’ve “Kind of” Come a Long Way Baby, but Larger Pipeline and More Intentional Action from Industry and Educators Needed

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Diversity in the workplace makes us smarter. Recent studies show that diversity, particularly racial diversity, in both large corporations and small groups, enhances creativity and leads to innovation, better decision-making—and more effective problem solving (Phillips, 2014). While society has grown more demographically diverse over the years, the advertising industry—along with the academic institutions that provide it with the talent pool—has fallen woefully behind the country. For example, according to a study by the Madison Avenue Project, Blacks represent 13% of the population but make up only 5% of advertising professionals (Schultz, 2011). In fact, the study pointed out that nearly a fifth of large ad agencies employ no Black professionals, a rate that is 60% higher than the general labor market (Schultz, 2011). Moreover, research demonstrates that, on those occasions when Blacks are employed in the industry, most are generally relegated to jobs in stand-alone multicultural agencies (Bendick & Egan, 2009).

The advertising industry has been charged with and trusted to reach and influence an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse populace, but lacks credibility given the limited extent to which it has impacted the color line within its own industry. Frankly, this problem is not just the responsibility of the advertising industry. It shares responsibility with the academy for the lack of workplace diversity in advertising.

The History of Advertising Workplace Diversity

The advertising industry has a dismal history of hiring members from underrepresented groups. As early as the 1960s, agencies have been under significant pressure by civil rights organizations to diversify, an issue that became particularly evident after an Urban League investigation revealed few creative and executive positions were occupied by Blacks (Chambers, 2008). Another investigation, led by the American Association of Advertising Agencies in 1963, discovered that fewer than one percent of employees at Madison Avenue agencies were Black (Patel, 2010). This disgraceful hiring record sparked the New York State Commission on Human Rights (NYSCHR) to launch several inquiries examining the hiring practices of many New York City agencies (Elias, Phillips, VanRysdam & Chun, in press).

For example, in 1968 the Commission charged nearly a dozen leading ad agencies with employment discrimination (Chambers, 2008) and initiated complaints against a number of agencies for what the Commission called a poor record of hiring minorities and an unwillingness and inability to make meaningful changes to the culture (Chambers, 2008).

In fact, just ten years ago the New York City Commission on Human Rights threatened to force executives at leading advertising agencies to testify about their dismal record of hiring ethnic minorities. Out of this fear, 16 of New York’s top ad agencies signed agreements with the Commission to increase their ethnic minority recruiting, diversify senior management and allow city officials to track change, there needs to be a more concerted effort by both the industry and the academy to diversify agencies by creating a talent pipeline of diverse candidates.

Although advertising managers voice their desire to hire more ethnic minorities, many claim they cannot find diverse candidates, because few minorities pursue advertising as a career (Schultz, 2011). This is partially true. The majority of college students studying advertising and related fields actually reflect the advertising workforce—predominantly white and mostly female (Bendick & Egan, 2009; Fullerton & Kendrick, 2014). To impact
their hiring progress (Texeira, 2006). Despite these efforts, a 2008 follow-up study conducted by attorney Cyrus Mehri and the NAACP concluded in a 100-page report that despite the threat of fines, necessary improvements in racial balance in advertising employment rates never occurred. The NAACP study revealed that “racial discrimination is 38 percent worse in the advertising industry than in the overall U.S. labor market [sic], and that the ‘discrimination divide’ between advertising and other U.S. industries is more than twice as bad now as it was 30 years ago [sic].” (NAACP, 2008, para. 3) Furthermore, the report focused on dismissing the effectiveness of efforts long popular in the ad industry, such as internships, scholarships and entry-level hiring programs, given only 2% of New York City advertising managers were Black, and Black employment rates had barely improved since a similar report’s findings from 1968 (Cardwell & Elliott, 2006). In 2009, the New York City Commission on Human Rights expressed their dissatisfaction with the limited progress made by the agencies since the Commission had intervened in 2006 with the threat of a lawsuit (Bush, 2011).

Signs of Progress
In fairness, some progress has been made to diversify the workplace. By 2007, noticeable improvements had been made by the 15 ad agencies that voluntarily agreed to have their minority hiring practices monitored. These agencies reported that among their new hires 25% were Black, Hispanic or Asian American, exceeding their target of 18% (Elliott, 2008). In fact, for Young & Rubicam, 27% of their newly hired managers and 46% of their newly hired professionals were ethnic minorities (Elliott, 2008). In 2009, Blacks represented 5% of the total advertising workforce across the United States (Bendick & Egan, 2009) – not sufficient, but significantly higher than the 1% of the advertising workforce that Blacks occupied in the 60s and 70s (Chambers, 2008).

Moreover, the progress that the advertising industry has made extends beyond hiring to include efforts to increase the talent pool and expand the pipeline of racial and ethnic minorities through specific initiatives. These industry initiatives include: The American Advertising Federation’s (AAF) Most Promising Multicultural Student Program, AAF Mosaic Career Fair and Conference, the American Association of Advertising Agencies’ Multicultural Advertising Internship Program, the Marcus Graham Project and the AdColor Awards.

A few other programs initiated by industry to change the face of the advertising workforce include a compelling video to attract ethnic minority students to advertising entitled The Pursuit of Passion: Diversity in Advertising. Additionally, in 2011, during the popular NYC Advertising Week an annual one-day conference sponsored by The One Club was launched, entitled “Where are All the Black People?”, to foster more diverse creative talent in the industry. This multicultural career fair included seminars, workshops, panels and on-site interviews aimed at college students and young professionals. More recently, The One Club has renamed this event “Here Are All The Black People,” in part to respond to industry executives’ claim that they cannot find Blacks to hire. The industry also has partnered with the American Advertising Federation (AAF) to develop a summer program for high school students called AdCamp (Oliver, Murphy & Tag, 2014).

Through the aforementioned initiatives and programs, the advertising industry has committed time, energy, talent and money to diversify the advertising workforce. In comparison, what has the academy done to develop, prepare and increase the talent pool of ethnic and racial minorities?

Like the advertising industry, the academy in general, and advertising educators in particular, need to be accountable to support diversity efforts. It is critical for the academy to make more deliberate and proactive efforts to recruit, train and retain diverse talent for advertising programs within their institutions. Communication and advertising departments must take more responsibility to increase the number of ethnic minority students majoring in advertising and related fields.

The Pipeline – The Role and Responsibility of Advertising Educators
Some ad agency executives eager to hire young Blacks have complained that the lack of diversity in agencies is not intentional, but rather due to the lack of diverse applicants. What is the responsibility of advertising educators to address this need?

Preparing ethnic minorities with the tools they will need to attain and succeed in an advertising career begins in the academy (Grow, Mallia, Williams, Pollock & Klinger, 2015). The academy serves as the training ground for future advertising employees (Erba, Phillips & Geana, 2012). In an effort to produce ethnic minority students, advertising and communication programs must first survey their own programs to uncover any shortcomings that
may limit their efforts to create, maintain and graduate a diverse talent pool (Erba et al., 2012).

One contributor may be the dearth of ethnic minority students majoring in advertising and communication. Ethnic minorities (i.e., Blacks, Hispanics and Asian Americans) constitute only about 20% of students studying communication and advertising-related fields (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This is particularly troubling for two specific minority groups – Blacks and Hispanics, who are poorly represented. According to the data, although Hispanics and Blacks constitute 16% and 12% of the population, respectively, they only represent about 7% and 9% of students enrolled in communication related programs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2011), which is exacerbated by their high college attrition rates (Erba et al., 2012). Hence, it is not surprising why industry leaders and educators alike argue that few people from diverse racial and ethnic groups are familiar with advertising opportunities or even understand the pathway to gaining positions in advertising (Vega, 2012).

Therefore, the responsibility to diversify is shared, or should be shared, by employers, professional associations and advertising educators. Universities, and the professors and administrators within them, can literally build the pipeline of talent. What changes can educators make? What responsibilities and actions can and should educators take on?

First, it is essential to acknowledge that diversity cannot be achieved accidentally. It must be achieved with intentionality and purpose. According to a 2006 article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, “nearly every university, it seems, is racing to appoint a chief diversity officer.” (Gose, 2006, p. 55) (Many large corporations have also hired people in this role.) These administrators are responsible for diversifying faculty, curriculum and student body (Gose, 2006). Given the enormous need for diverse candidates in the pipeline to help support ad agencies in their recruitment efforts, it is recommended that communication and advertising departments appoint “diversity officers” who are responsible for recruitment, mentorship, support and career preparation for diverse, often underserved candidates.

Second, advertising educators should visit and speak to high school students and inform them about the advertising industry, as these students are considering career options. Reaching out to high school students can be an important “recruitment tool for college programs in advertising, public relations and communications, as well as a means to increase diversity and funnel new talent into the advertising industry” (Oliver, et al., 2014, p. 36).

For example, in 2011, Temple University launched a High School Advertising Workshop. Advertising students were given an opportunity to participate in a unique community-based learning course, in which the university students traveled weekly to two local inner-city public high schools to teach advertising. For high school students, the goals of the program were to inspire them to graduate, apply to college and consider a career in advertising. For college students, the goals were to develop teaching skills and leadership skills, strengthen and develop advertising skills, and learn about the challenges facing urban education. The program was funded by a grant from two professional associations: The Philly Ad Club and the Pennsylvania Association of Broadcasters. The goal of the supporters was to help build the pipeline to diversify the local advertising industry. At the conclusion of the program, qualitative results indicated that it was an extremely valuable experience for both the high school and college students.

Third, diversity efforts by educators should raise students’ awareness of the issue by incorporating curriculum changes, such as the development and launch of diversity courses like “Stereotypes in the Media,” “Multicultural Marketing,” “Advertising and Diversity,” “Account Planning in a Diverse World” and “Advertising and Society.”

Fourth, educators should encourage diverse students to form professional student organizations that focus on advertising. For example, in an effort to address and rectify the underrepresentation of Blacks in advertising, The Ohio State University (OSU) School of Communication founded the national Black Advertising and Strategic Communication Association (BASCA) in 2012. This student organization is a partnership among students, faculty and industry professionals intended to develop and prepare Black students for careers in advertising, PR and marketing. BASCA seeks to: 1) increase students’ un-
derstanding of the advertising industry and its practices; 2) lead more Black students to aspire to and achieve careers in advertising and related fields; 3) provide Black students with information about and access to available careers in advertising and strategic communication and 4) provide students with access to academic and professional mentors and role-models. This organization has been responsible for students landing jobs at some of the most prestigious advertising and PR firms in the country, such as BBDO, Ogilvy & Mather and Edelman.

Lastly, educators in advertising and communication departments should work with faculty, administrators, university officials, alumni and industry executives to establish scholarships and student awards specific to students of color who are majoring in advertising and related fields. Although this is a short and insufficient list, it represents some first steps that advertising educators can utilize to develop a larger pool of racially and ethnically diverse candidates.

Conclusion
It is important for advertising educators and scholars to be more intentional in addressing issues of diversity in their research. Little has been written on the issue of advertising and diversity in advertising and education-related journals. For example, a rudimentary content analysis, via a search using the terms ‘race,’ ‘ethnicity’ and ‘diversity’ in articles published in Journal of Advertising Education (JAE) over the last six years, found only one such article (i.e., Oliver et al., 2014). This finding substantiates the need for a special issue in JAE on advertising and diversity. Just as JAE has been at the forefront of advertising education over the last 20 years, over the next 20 years it is hoped that diversity will be a significant component of its issues, articles, editorial review board and, of course, its success.

References
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