

Diversity Strategies – 2010-2011

In principle and in practice, AAUW values and seeks a diverse membership. There shall be no barriers to full participation in this organization on the basis of gender, race, creed, age, sexual orientation, national origin, disability, or class.

“THE JOY OF CREATION IS IN ITS INFINITE DIVERSITY AND IN THE WAYS OUR DIFFERENCES COMBINE TO CREATE MEANING AND BEAUTY.” -- MR. SPOCK, “STAR TREK”

Valuing Diversity: Premises (core beliefs)

- Valuing diversity strengthens our ability to work together to achieve great things.
- Valuing diversity goes beyond race and gender to include age, education, job function, life styles, disabilities and other characteristics and factors that make us different.
- Diversity introduces individuality and new perspectives into any organization.
- Uniqueness should be celebrated.
- We all want an equitable and harmonious world for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren.
- State and Branch leaders must set the example for change.
- A commitment by EACH and EVERY ONE OF US to learn and understand the value of diversity.

Strategies for Achieving a More Diverse Membership

Creative approaches to meeting the needs of women of diverse ages, backgrounds and lifestyles are becoming a hall mark of the most successful AAUW branches.

Strategies highlighted are designed to help presidents, committee chairs and members enhance their efforts to recruit diverse women into AAUW membership and leadership.

Challenges of Recruiting Diverse Members

Several factors discourage potential members from joining an organization including:

- Failing to make the value clear to potential members. Unless individuals understand the value of joining AAUW and what we have to offer, they are not likely to explore the possibility of joining.
- Failing to be sensitive to potential feelings of social and professional discomfort. Even for the most assimilated of us, it is not always easy to join a new organization in which the culture and rules are unknown. If you add to this the challenges of being a “minority” in a dominate culture, it is easy to understand an individual’s reluctance to overcome what can be perceived as barriers to membership.

Guidelines for Achieving Diversity

Achieving diversity requires a strategic effort. The following guidelines may simplify the process and help branch leaders create a member base that reflects the diversity of their communities. Tailor your goals to your branch and your demographic environment and keep them in mind as you review the following strategies.

Strategy I – Set up a diversity committee.

1. Ask for volunteers who have an interest in the topic and who will bring the commitment and open-mindedness that are essential.
2. Attempt to model diversity on the committee but never lose sight of the most important criteria – commitment and fair-mindedness.
3. Do not work in isolation: Call on diversity committees in other local organizations to learn from their mistakes and successes.
4. Take time to get comfortable with each other before beginning. This comfort will allow committee members to be more candid with their concerns and ideas, to risk more and to, therefore, develop a more innovative and creative program. Choose a leader who is supported by branch leadership; who is strong, committed and fair-minded; and who is action-oriented.

Strategy II – Examine the demographics of your organization.

1. Compile statistics on your branch and your potential member pool. Numbers will vary based on geographical location.
2. The particular categories of membership on which you focus will depend upon the “wants” of your branch. For example, it may be appropriate to look at age or differences in race and ethnicity. TIP: Do not rely entirely on a review of last names of your membership to verify ethnicity.

Strategy III – Develop written (or web) materials that visually reflect the diversity that you wish to attain.

1. Ensure the models and images in your newsletters and meeting materials reflect ethnic, racial, age and gender diversity as well as persons with disabilities. Do this even if your current membership is 100% homogenous. Viewing diversity can have a powerful effect on an individual’s belief that she is welcomed into your organization.

Strategy IV – Develop a diversity statement, set goals and design diversity strategies.

1. Before designing your diversity statement, survey the perceptions and “wants” of your current membership. Without buy-in from the membership itself, any program will eventually fall apart.
2. Design a mission statement that is appropriate to your branch and that reflects its potential demographic, diversity philosophy and member “wants”

3. Be timely. No more than three or four meetings should be needed to design the statement. TIP: If there is a delay in moving forward, try to assess if the committee is afraid to reach a conclusion for fear of taking the wrong first step. Remind the committee that the first step does not have to be perfect. Make your diversity initiative goals reasonable.
4. Be realistic.
5. Be concrete and measurable.
6. Build into your system key points at which you can stop, regroup and modify the program to meet your current needs. Network with other local organizations and AAUW Oklahoma state officers to learn new strategies.

Strategy V – Include articles on diversity in your publications and presentation on the topic at meetings.

1. This serves, as do all these strategies, to communicate your interest in and respect for both current and potential members of diverse backgrounds.
2. Present the topic of diversity in a practical and meaningful way. Suggestions for innovative programs and articles include: incentives appropriate to a diverse branch; strategies for maintaining harmony and productivity in a diverse branch; and recruitment, and retention approaches. TIP: Be creative. Talk to other local organizations about how they have addressed the topic and design your own branch – specific approach.

Strategy VI – Ensure that speakers are aware of and respectful to diverse participants.

1. Include in speaker instructions the importance of using examples and language that are pertinent and inoffensive to all listeners. TIP: Avoid getting trapped into the excesses of “political correctness” – this can stifle speaker creativity, be patronizing to diverse members and create resentment and backlash within the membership.
2. Share with speakers any issues around diversity that are being faced by your branch so they can be addressed with awareness, fairness and sensitivity.
3. Seek out speakers who ask about the diversity of your audience and are prepared to tailor presentations to meet those needs.
4. Seek out diverse speakers!

Strategy VII – Design mentoring programs for potential members of all backgrounds.

1. An excellent goal for recruiting members of different backgrounds is to involve young members who can move up the ranks and create diversity in the branch. Mentoring programs in which more experienced members are available to counsel and guide protégées are an excellent way to begin this process.
2. Treat the mentoring program as a reward for excellence, not special treatment.

3. Train member volunteers and protégées in the mentoring function. (Corporations have learned the hard way that mentoring is not as easy as it looks.) Protégées sometimes feel reluctant to ask certain questions for fear of appearing stupid; mentors fail to bring up key subjects because they do not want to patronize; and both parties may feel overwhelmed by the amount of material to be covered. Instruct mentors and protégées in the importance of: setting mutually agreed upon goals; being open with fears and concerns; and periodically taking stock of the protégées progress.

Strategy VIII – Reward the diversity efforts of each of your members

1. Recognition is important. Reward individual member efforts to recruit and value diversity within your branch through branch meetings and newsletters.
2. Set aside specific meetings for the express purpose of discussing diversity and recognize creative ways to recruit and value diverse members.

Strategy IX – Make your local organization visible in minority communities.

1. Participate in “minority” community activities, such as local business fairs, giving to community charities or helping with fund raisers and other community efforts.
2. Network with local church leaders, ethnic newspaper editors and community leaders. Invite them to speak at branch meetings and discuss their communities in your newsletter.
3. Advertise in ethnic and foreign language publications.
4. Get to know and cultivate relationships with professionals in “minority” associations. TIP: The term “minority” is in quotes. Today the word is used less often. To some it connotes an air of powerlessness and inequality. It never hurts to be sensitive to the terms you use when seeking exposure into diverse communities. Check with several community leaders in order to get a variety of perspective on what terminology will be accepted by the largest number.

Strategy X – Share your achievements with other branches and with AAUW Oklahoma

1. When it comes to diversity efforts, many branches are simultaneously reinventing the wheel. Arrange to meet with, conference call or e-mail with members in other branches to discuss your successes, failures and lessons learned.
2. If you have a particularly successful program, write about it and submit it to AAUW Oklahoma for possible publication.

Conclusion: Making Diversity Work

Above all else, as you seek to recruit, retain and involve a diverse membership, take special care to model the principles of diversity that are key to the success of any organization. These include:

- 1.** Communicate openly and respectfully with each other and with your members of all backgrounds.
- 2.** Be respectful of diversity and avoid the paralyzing and divisive effects of excessive reliance on the rules of “political correctness.”
- 3.** Never lower your standards – a diverse membership is a quality membership.
- 4.** Avoid the dangers of stereotyping populations and lumping people together into unrealistic and unwanted categories and groups.
- 5.** Remember what diversity really means. Do not favor one group at the expense of another. The goal of your efforts is to create an organization that is hospitable to all members and that fairly reflects the demographics of your locale.
- 6.** Expect the best and enjoy the creativity, energy and vitality that only a truly representative association can bring.

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