



ANALYSIS

Kent State University encountered an interesting challenge late in 2001, when the Vice Provost approached a minority business owner for a donation to the university. The business owner in turn asked how much of KSU's purchasing was with minority businesses in the community. Unable to provide an answer, this question signaled a turning point for KSU.

Subsequently, the KSU Board of Trustees inquired about the percentage of non-construction spending that the university was doing with M/WBE's. KSU'S student body is over 50% women and over 16% are minority, but their supplier relationships did not reflect these demographics. KSU made a commitment to change this.

There was no mandate for KSU to make the consequent changes to its supplier diversity efforts. The commitment to embark on a serious supplier diversity initiative originated at KSU's highest levels of governance and administration.

A few hurdles stood in the way. Purchasing agents had long-standing relationships, some over 20 years, with existing suppliers. They were satisfied with those relationships. In addition, minorities and women in business were cynical about doing business with KSU. Nevertheless, the board, administration, and staff of KSU understood there was a critical need for change.

RESEARCH METHODS

Kent State University Board of Trustees, V.P. of Diversity, Purchasing Director and Chief Financial Officer engaged Synergy to assist in the design and implementation of a new supplier diversity initiative. The revised plan had four major goals:

- Internal Public Relations/Communication—Design and implement a communication plan to openly discuss the initiative with purchasing agents, explain the importance and connect them with minorities and women in business.
- External Public Relations—Connect KSU to minority and women business organizations throughout Northeast Ohio by attending events and creating a supplier diversity newsletter.
- Supplier Diversity Advisory Board—Construct bylaws for an advisory board and recruit members from the community to partner with the university to implement the best practices and become ambassadors for the initiative.

- Evaluate Progress--by design and implementation of an extensive research project. Synergy talked with more than 100 Women/Minority Business Executives (W/MBE) regarding their experiences doing business with KSU and interviewed 25 purchasing agents regarding their experiences with diverse suppliers.

RESULTS

The evaluation process and subsequent initiatives have been quite successful. Spending among diverse suppliers was less than a half million dollars in 2003. At the end of fiscal year 2008, spending among diverse suppliers increased to just under \$10 million per year. The procurement department has also increased the number of diverse vendors registered with KSU to almost 300. Synergy's work has been important in accomplishing the initiative's strategic goals; however, the cooperation and partnership with the administration and staff has been invaluable to its success.

KSU Supplier Diversity is now a nationally recognized program and is considered best-in-class. The program's co-chairs speak nationally about the structure, challenges, and benefits of the initiative. The positive impact of doing business with more diverse suppliers has had a ripple effect across Northeast Ohio. The local economy is served. Underserved businesses grow and thrive. Kent State University is currently a beacon of light in supplier diversity for institutions of higher learning across the country.