

# Growing Diversity

COLLEGE HOSTS UNIQUE BUSINESS PLAN COMPETITION



Successful organizations have long understood that fostering diversity within their ranks is a critical component to their success. It is a matter not only of recruiting minority employees—as important as that is—but also learning to recognize individual differences and leverage the strengths of each distinct person.

Diversity is especially important in today's ever-shrinking world, where your subordinates may span multiple countries, or your best customer might be ten time zones away.

As a major university in a largely white state, diversity takes on even more importance for Iowa State. And the College of Business has been active in seeking new ways to raise awareness of the importance of diversity. The college has an active Diversity Advisory Committee among its faculty and staff and the Multicultural Business Network offers networking and resources for minority business students.

In fall 2008, the College of Business presented its students with an innovative educational opportunity, called *ichooseDiversity*. The premise was simple: form teams of three students apiece, and submit a proposal for an initiative that will foster diversity in the College of Business, at Iowa State University, or in the Ames community.

Each team was asked to consider its overall goal, the budget to fund its proposal, marketing tactics, time and resources required for implementation, sustainability, and how to assess the outcome.



Sharon Slaikeu, Curtis Nielsen, and Olivia Lattin make their winning presentation at the *ichooseDiversity* competition in November 2008.

The competition was the brainchild of College of Business alumnus Ha-Keem Abdel-Khaliq ('96 Management, '98 MBA), who works as a sourcing specialist in Cargill's recruiting department. The idea, he says, was borne out of Cargill's own diversity initiatives but is directed specifically toward college students.

"My hope with this idea was that it would not just generate ideas among college students on how

to improve diversity in their communities,” Abdel-Khaliq said, “but also that it would give Cargill a chance to connect with campuses.”

Abdel-Khaliq brought Cargill on as a sponsor, and Cargill funded \$1,000 stipends for all three members of the winning team. The College of Business Diversity Advisory Committee coordinated the competition.

But the competition didn't end there: Cargill also agreed to fund up to \$2,500 for the winning team to implement its proposal in the community. So in addition to the satisfaction of knowing they wrote a winning business plan, students on the winning team would also gain the valuable experience of executing it.

In all, ten student teams submitted written proposals, which were evaluated by a team of judges from Cargill, Iowa State, and the City of Ames. Four finalists were selected from all entrants and asked to prepare 30-minute oral presentations outlining their proposals and taking questions

from the panel of judges at the final competition on November 10, 2008.

The proposals ranged from the focused and very tactical to large, inclusive events. One finalist group wanted to create a council that sponsors initiatives to increase, retain, and promote minority student populations. Another wanted to create an education program for students to teach them how to handle diversity in different settings. Perhaps the most distinct proposal came from a group that wanted to target Iowa high schools with high minority concentrations, then reaching out to those prospective students using Iowa State students of similar backgrounds.

The winning proposal came from Olivia Lattin, (graduated December 2008, management), Curtis Nielsen (senior, management and marketing), and Sharon Slaikeu (graduated December 2008,

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## Choose Diversity Finalists

*The four finalist groups and their proposals.*

### Winner

Olivia Lattin *graduated December 2008, management*  
Curtis Nielsen *senior, management and marketing*  
Sharon Slaikeu *graduated December 2008, management*

*Hold a festival in Ames showcasing the unique cultural backgrounds of those in the community. The festival would include representatives from all Ames organizations, including Ames High, ISU and local vendors.*

Peter Arentson *senior, marketing*  
Jessica Huckstadt *senior, marketing*  
Stephanie Wawers *senior, management*

*Create a Diversity Connection Program to improve diversity education among students and teach them how to manage diversity in social and business settings.*

**Award for Best Presenter: Timothy Miew Shen Su**

D’Juan Cobbs *senior, accounting*  
Thomas Harmsen *junior, marketing*  
Zhiyi “Jack” Xu *senior, management*

*Develop a Multicultural Business Advisory Council for Young Business Professionals to plan and fund events, projects, and organizations that will increase the retention and advancement of multicultural students.*

Fabrice Ouedraogo *sophomore, finance*  
Timothy Miew Shen Su *junior, finance*  
Ismael Kouotou N’Joya *senior, finance and economics*

*Create a relationship between Iowa State diversity associations and the most diverse counties in Iowa. The program could be used for local diversity recruiting and improve community involvement between Iowa State and those areas.*

**Award for Best in Question and Answer: D’Juan Cobbs**

**“All of the ideas were top-notch. The results were so positive and in many ways exceeded original expectations.”**

— Ha-Keem Abdel-Khaliq

management). They proposed the Cyclone Cultural Festival, a daylong event which would showcase the unique cultural backgrounds of those in the community. The festival would feature ethnic

restaurants and vendors, diversity-related clubs and organizations, and speakers about numerous cultural topics. The group targeted September 2009 as the date for the festival.

They modeled their proposal after the U.S. Cellular World Food Festival, an annual event in the East Village area of Des Moines in conjunction with the World Food Prize awards. That event features local vendors who serve international cuisine. The event was free and also featured entertainment.

To pull off a large festival on a \$2,500 budget would require meticulous planning, and plan they did. Every last detail—up to and including equipment rentals, security, and cleanup costs—was covered. The group even contacted the Iowa State police and risk management departments for their assessments and prepared a formal event notification form. They also planned to supplement their \$2,500 budget by pursuing sponsorships and hosting raffles and other fundraisers.

Lattin said that early community interest in participating in their winning event has been encouraging. “We have several community interest and diversity groups coming forward and showing enthusiasm for the festival,” she said. “Which we really appreciate in light of the scale the whole event is taking on.”

Mark Peterson, the college’s director of graduate career services and a member of its Diversity Advisory Committee, was enthusiastic about the outcome of this first-of-its-kind competition. “It was really interesting to see such widely diverse interpretations of the theme and ideas generated, and that is just what we wanted,” he said. “The judges had a very interesting and challenging task to decide which proposal would have the most impact on the ISU and Ames communities and be most realistic to implement.”



Ha-Keem Adbel-Khaliq of Cargill presents Timothy Miew Shen Su with the best presenter award following the ichooseDiversity competition.

Abdel-Khaliq agreed. “All of the ideas were top-notch. The results were so positive and in many ways exceeded original expectations.”

Peterson says he is excited about what the future might hold for this competition. “There is solid potential for this competition

to continue and to grow remarkably,” he said. “As a first-time event, we were pleasantly surprised with the total

number of student proposal submissions, as well as with how much effort the finalists clearly put into their presentations. The caliber of work done for this was superb.

“And as a result, there has been strong interest from across the university, both on the part of students and departments, about the future of this event.”

This year’s student participants felt that ichooseDiversity provided a valuable experience. “I think the competition is a great way for students to show that they are willing to go above and beyond for something they believe in,” said Lattin.

Nielsen agreed, and pointed to another, unexpected benefit of the competition. “It is even helping me in my job search,” he said. “I feel it would greatly benefit everyone who is involved.” ■

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— Olivia Lattin