

**Leading by Action: The Fierce Urgency for Diversity and Inclusion  
in the Foreign Policy Workforce**

**Hearing**

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Chairwoman Lee, Ranking Member Rogers, members of the Subcommittee on State, Foreign Affairs and Related Programs, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the imperative of building a foreign affairs work force reflective of America.

My name is Abigail Golden-Vazquez and I am a Latina professional with 30 plus years of foreign affairs experience in the public, private and non-profit sectors. Most recently, I was the founding executive director of the Aspen Institute Latinos and Society Program focused on the growing importance of Latino Americans to continued success of the nation. Prior to that I helped expand the Institute's global leadership initiatives in China, the Middle East, Africa and Central America. I also served as a communications specialist with USAID/Honduras for two years following Hurricane Mitch.

Despite decades focused on increasing diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the foreign affairs workforce we have failed to achieve meaningful representation and we have even slid backwards. According to a recent Foreign Affairs article "the top four ranks of the Foreign Service are whiter today than they were two decades ago; only ten percent are people of color. Just seven percent of the overall Foreign Service is made up of Black people, and just seven percent are Hispanic—well below each group's representation in the U.S. labor force."<sup>i</sup> A 2020 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on diversity at USAID noted little improvement from 2002-2018 with a small increase from 33% to 37%, with Black employees down from 26% to 21% and Hispanics up from 3% to 6%; far below the 17% of Latinos in the 2018 workforce. The same study found that racially and ethnically diverse professionals were 31-41% less likely to be promoted than whites.<sup>ii</sup> Remediating this diversity gap is a matter of global competitiveness and national security.

Study after study shows that more diverse organizations are more effective and

innovative, and less likely to succumb to group think, yet we are stifling our greatest asset. The foreign affairs field — be it government, aid organizations, not-for-profits, foundations, think tanks or policy institutes that contribute to foreign affairs policy— lags behind the private sector in accepting diversity and inclusion as necessary for business.

By the year 2045, the United States is projected to be a majority non-white nation<sup>iii</sup> and by 2060, nearly 1/3 its population will be Latinx<sup>iv</sup>. Our democracy can no longer justify the exclusion of the “emerging majority” from important leadership and decision-making roles that would lead to better outcomes for everyone. We need only look to at our border, the humanitarian crisis in Central America and the health crisis in Brazil to see how necessary increasing Hispanics in the foreign affairs work force is to our ability to meet global concerns in our very own back yard.

There are many areas of needed attention, however I ‘ll focus my remarks on three priority areas: Leadership, Retention, and Accountability with an eye to solutions for each to promote a more diverse and, and more importantly *inclusive* foreign affairs work force. I’ll also interweave a Latino<sup>v</sup> lens throughout where possible.

### **Leadership Matters!**

The Senior Foreign Service remains largely white and male irrespective of Party or Administration. Leaders set the tone for and influence organizational culture. Under Secretary Colin Powell, diversity increased, under Secretary Mike Pompeo, it declined. Not because of their race per se, but because of how they prioritized D&I as leaders.

This means that leaders themselves must understand at an intrinsic level the added value that diverse professionals bring and champion them. D&I must be internalized as a mission critical

diplomatic and national security priority rather than something nice to do, or arbitrarily imposed upon an already stretched staff. It must permeate throughout the culture of the organization.

Latinos, and other diverse groups, including immigrants, LGBTQ, and people of different socioeconomic background, abilities and experiences have crossed a myriad of cultural barriers, and they have multi-level cultural competence.<sup>vi</sup> They routinely serve as the interlocutors, translators and cultural navigators for family members and for themselves. These experiences provide an invaluable skillset for a career in foreign affairs and should be recognized as such and valued by leadership and the organizational the culture.

Former Peace Corps director Gaddi Vasquez said he framed inclusion not as a request but as an expectation. Only when D&I is modeled by leadership authentically and flows through all aspects of organizations, with a culture that is “bought in” to the added value it offers, will we see real progress.

D&I enabling leadership traits:

- Leadership treats D&I as mission critical and not a box checking exercise.
- Hold themselves accountable for progress on D&I, and reward those who make progress on D&I, not just white staff.
- Provide state of the art leadership training to all staff moving into positions of authority<sup>vii</sup>.  
(Note, this is not diversity training.)
- Set clear goals and ensure compensation and promotions are tied to concrete actions that improve diversity outcomes.
- Exhibit zero-tolerance of discriminatory behavior, such as bullying and harassment, and actively help staff identify and address microaggressions.

- Create institutional understanding of cultural bias and build a culture that welcomes resistance.
- Recognize, promote and reward diverse perspectives for what they contribute to the mission.
- Enable an environment of equality, openness, and belonging.<sup>viii</sup>

### **Beyond Recruitment to Retention**

Recruitment without a plan for retention is recipe for failure. Often the lack of diverse pipeline is blamed on the pipeline. While more work needs to be done to increase the pipeline and reach a much wider array of diverse candidates, diversity requires both a robust pipeline and a plan for retention.

Programs like Payne, Pickering and Rangel provide an important recruitment tool to increase entry into the foreign service for underrepresented racial and ethnic groups; however, many of these Fellows eventually choose to leave. Many of them said peers and seniors treated them as though they jumped the line or were less deserving because they came through a non-traditional channel. When talented diverse professionals make it through the door, if they don't feel welcomed, are not allowed a seat the table, or don't see a merit-based pathway forward, they will go where their contributions *are* appreciated.<sup>ixx</sup>

Foreign Service can better foster D&I retention by creating an environment of equality, openness, and belonging.<sup>xi</sup> But there is also more that can be done to improve the pipeline, including by helping young people understand foreign affairs and imagine themselves in foreign affairs careers. The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST) does just that

through its oral histories of diplomats and innovative curriculum tailored to middle and high school students.

Solutions to recruit and retain a more diverse workforce:

- Expand recruitment geographically and beyond graduate international relations programs and top-tier universities to include community colleges.<sup>xii</sup>
- Deploy retired diverse ambassadors and high-level Foreign Service Officers (FSOs), USAID and Peace Corps mission Directors and senior Foreign Commercial Service and Foreign Agricultural Service officers in recruitment and to serve as role models.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Offer *paid* internships to make gaining experience affordable.
- Support education and the development of resources that help demystify careers in foreign affairs through organizations like ADST.
- Tap into organizations like Latinos in Foreign Policy<sup>xiv</sup> and the International Career Advancement Program which maintain excellent vetted talent banks.
- Implement a formal mentorship program to help diverse staff navigate the culture and career paths including intentional pairing with both diverse and non-diverse mentors.
- Facilitate candidate identification of a “sponsor” who can serve as an advocate and stand-in when they are not in the room.
- Create a formal Posse<sup>xv</sup> like program to provide peer support to Payne, Pickering, and Rangel Fellows and other diverse employees.
- Provide financial support and deepened partnership with programs like the International Career Advancement Program for midcareer diverse professionals in foreign affairs

which has an excellent track record of alumni advancement to senior positions and serves a Posse like function.

- Provide career development opportunities including how to manage and lead, give and receive constructive feedback, and bring others along to *all* interested staff and reward participants with more opportunities.<sup>xvi</sup>
- Align recruitment, retention, and promotion to strategic goals.
- Recognize, promote and reward diverse perspectives for what they contribute to the mission.

### **Incentivize and Hold Accountable**

You can't improve upon what you do not measure. Efforts to secure more diversity and inclusion, must be funded, tracked, understood, recognized and rewarded to be effective. By collecting and analyzing data on diversity over time, comparing those numbers to the numbers at other organizations, and sharing them with key stakeholders, organizations can learn and iterate while increasing accountability and transparency around diversity issues. Measuring results against goals for different groups provides insight into what is working for whom, what is not, and allows for course correction accordingly.

Solutions to ensure enable greater accountability and incentivize progress by:

- Set clear goals, define metrics and measure progress over time.
- Tie compensation and advancement to achieving clearly set D&I goals.
- Include specific actions taken to advance D&I in the review process along with other metrics or actions taken to advance the mission.

- Offer bonus or advancement incentives for managers/leaders who diversify, develop and promote their staff and curtail promotions of those that don't. (Apply equally across managers of different races and ethnicities and abilities)
- Disaggregate collection of diversity data by type (gender, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, socioeconomic circumstance, etc.) to better understand and address specific concerns.
- Share learning and best practices across agencies similarly to the Think Tank Diversity Consortium.<sup>xvii</sup>

## Conclusion

The case for diversity and inclusion in foreign affairs has been made over many decades but has failed to be implemented with the full buy-in, resources and consistency required for success. By leaving our greatest asset on the table, we are leaving our foreign service less prepared to meet the challenges of a new global order with new global players and new demands on diplomacy and our institutions. To turn this around, profound and relentless organizational and financial commitment to D&I will be required immediately and over the long haul.

There are plenty of great ideas and solutions out there to help get us there, many of them identified in recent reports led by members of this very panel. It's easy to say this or that should happen, but without leadership and financial support, the best ideas remain just that, ideas. The next step needs to be to prioritize and fund the most promising evidence based solutions and organizations with a track record of success.

Programs like ADST document and provide examples to educate and inform about diplomatic careers. Pickering, Rangel and Payne have been effective in helping more diverse candidates through the door but more needs to be done on retention. The International Career

Advancement Program helps diverse mid-career professionals break through the glass ceiling with a supportive environment, mentors, sponsors, and a Posse like function. These and other time-tested programs are proven to be effective, yet they need significant investment to continue and expand their important work.

Thanks to the committee for prioritizing and investing in organizations and solutions that foster a foreign service that represents America and the world in all her diversity and is therefore prepared to meet the global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and thank you for the opportunity.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-09-23/diplomacy-transformation#>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-477>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/3-ways-that-the-u-s-population-will-change-over-the-next-decade?>

<sup>iv</sup> US Census Bureau

<sup>v</sup> I use Latinx, Latino and Hispanic interchangeably throughout this testimony

<sup>vi</sup> Cultural competence is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures. Cultural competence encompasses. being aware of one's own world view. developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences. gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views.

<sup>vii</sup> The Center for Creative Leadership, The Executive Leadership Training Program at Harvard

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters>

<sup>ix</sup> A black female Foreign Service Office (FSO) at State cited “the slow pace to advancement and barriers that colleagues place in front of racial and ethnical diverse professionals” as a pain point. A recent informal survey of FSOs of color found 80% witnessed or experienced discrimination and 90% experienced micro-aggressions. On why employees of color leave, they said not having their work recognized for awards, not getting selected for career advancing opportunities such as leading special projects and events and seeing short lists for assignments and promotion peppered with people of color who are still not chosen for advancement.

<sup>x</sup> A survey of departed Pickering and Rangel Fellows reported the number one reason was personal: not wanting to be far from family, lack of career opportunities for spouses, dating life. The number two reason was discomfort with the culture and bureaucracy. Number three was advancement takes too long and the process is opaque.

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matter>

<sup>xii</sup> Look to Hispanic Serving Institutions, Hispanic Sororities and Fraternities, Historically Black Serving Institutions, Native Reservations, and schools for the site and hearing impaired to reach a wider array of candidates with truly diverse backgrounds and experiences

<sup>xiii</sup> Ambassador Peter Romero, Ambassador Frank Almaguer, Ambassador Lino Gutierrez, Ambassador Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, Ambassador William Ito, Ambassador Mari Carmen Aponte, Gaddi Vasquez and Ambassador Ruth Davis, are a few that I personally know and admire.

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://latinosforeignpolicy.org>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://www.possefoundation.org> The Posse Foundation provides scholarships for underrepresented students to attend college. Seeing a high incidence of dropouts for first generation college students experiencing loneliness and isolations they created possies or cohorts that would support each one another through the college process.

<sup>xvi</sup> The Center for Creative Leadership, Harvard Leadership Training are a few that helped me through the National Hispana Leadership Institute Executive Training.

<sup>xvii</sup> <https://www.thinktankdiversityaction.com>