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“Bridging the Gap: Improving Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Aviation Workforce.”

Challenges within the industry

Underrepresented/minority populations are not participating in Aerospace careers commensurate with their white counterparts, particularly in engineering (Illumoka, Milanovic; Grant, 2017), and the aircraft pilot workforce (Ison, Herron, Weiland, 2016). A lack of access to quality career and work opportunities has numerous negative consequences on individuals and thereby their families and communities. According to Ton,

“Low-wage workers live in a vicious cycle that prevents them from moving up. Many work multiple jobs. The associated stress undermines mental and physical health. Indeed, that stress lowers cognitive functioning, creating a “bandwidth tax” equal to a loss of 13 IQ points. Performance suffers as it is harder to keep up good attendance, focus on the job, be productive, and do your best for customers or coworkers. Unsurprisingly, these workers find it hard to climb the ladder of opportunity that this country has historically provided.” (Ton, 2020).

Furthermore, a lack of diversity in the aerospace industry only stands to weaken the United States’ position of pre-eminence within the field (Geis, J. P., II, Garretson, P. A., 2015). By failing to promote STEM and related disciplines to underrepresented populations.

OBAP’s Mission

As congress examines the range of solutions to both diversify and support critical staffing needs within the aerospace industry, OBAP has spent 45 years as a partner focused on supporting target populations to those ends.

While there may be varying approaches to the tackling the challenges associated with a lack of diversity within the industry, OBAP approaches the problem by designing interventions based on the following theory of change:

“An individual who is equipped with the skills to identify and begin a career in the aerospace industry, will have better opportunities to improve the quality of life for themselves, their families, and communities.”

At OBAP, we believe that a career in the aerospace industry creates a pathway that can help to significantly reduce the likelihood of individuals experiencing these effects. In a supporting relationship, increasing diversity within an industry has the effect of serving communities and being socially responsible by maintaining a workforce that is reflective of the American society, increasing innovation through a diversity of ideas challenging the status quo, and increasing the return on investment of human capital by reaching out broadly to all communities where talent

exists (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2020). Our goal is to ensure that individuals in target populations are equipped with the skills to successfully pursue a career in the aerospace industry.

The Aerospace industry continues to grow and provide career opportunities for candidates with the requisite skill sets. Additionally, these careers offer wages that consistently exceed that of national averages (United States Department of Labor, 2020). OBAP endeavors to facilitate aerospace career opportunities to underrepresented populations by providing targeted educational, professional development, and mentoring programs.

Our goals can be summarized as follows:

- To motivate youth to become educationally prepared for life
- To increase the number of underrepresented minorities and women professionals in aerospace and related industry careers
- To advocate for the concerns of our membership and constituencies
- To be at the forefront of crucial conversations that include minorities and women, or lack thereof, in executive leadership positions or on governing boards

Our programmatic model affirms and supports:

- Exposure to aerospace careers can help initiate an individual's desire to pursue a career in the Aerospace industry.
- Aerospace careers require average to above average specialized skills and preparation, which necessitates economic, academic, social, and career support resources.
- Mentoring programs have a net positive impact on personal attitudes, motivation, behaviors, relationships, health, and career outcomes.

Solutions

In our opinion, solution sets can be traced to three key areas. By targeting programs to address each of these areas, our nation can better meet the need to fill jobs with competitive professionals who reflect the diversity across the nation.

Build Awareness - At OBAP, we activate a network of over 2500 aerospace professionals to participate in school visits on a national level. We inform students about aerospace career tracks, and more importantly illustrate successful pathways.

Awareness building is still a critical first step in addressing the supply problem within workforce development. If target groups are not aware of possible career paths at an age early

enough to properly prepare, they will miss key opportunities. The 2021 FAA Workforce Development grant program is a good example of the type of support schools and non-profit organizations need to carry forward this work. Without adequate funding, we stand at risk of large populations within the nation never considering a career in aerospace. Other initiatives such as the Women in Aviation Advisory Board, et. al. are crucial stepping stones to understanding the challenges associated with building awareness of diversity challenges.

Support Competitive Skill Building - We've built several programs intended to address each learning phase from Elementary through College and beyond, to provide exposure to aerospace concepts, opportunities to build skills, and connect with mentors to help guide the way.

Once people become aware of career pathways within the industry, attention must shift to ensuring they are equipped with skills that make them competitive employees and leaders. Again, Congress making available funding for students to get the best training available is of paramount importance. As the cost of tuition and training within our post secondary education system continues to soar, many students will be “priced out” of these career opportunities. This broadly affects underrepresented people, as their socio-economic situations tend to result in lower incomes and access to funds.

Provide Advocacy and Access - We work hard to form relationships with industry partners to ensure our voice is heard on behalf of our members. Through our partnerships we have opportunities to steer the conversation, and reinforce the positive effects of diversity.

Congress can assist through encouraging and supporting employers and contractors who make diversity a key component to their recruitment and hiring practices. No one, including OBAP, is an advocate of lowering standards. On the contrary we believe by casting a wider net with the intention of seeking out candidates with a broad range of experiences and backgrounds is the best approach to ensuring our industry thrives. Programs and resources that help employers cast this “wide net” can help ensure we see more diversity in the candidates interviewed for positions.

Sources

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