



First-generation professionals bring 'cultural competence' to the workforce

By Julie Davidson, **cyberFEDS**® Editorial Director

Key points:

- **Include socioeconomic status in diversity efforts**
- **First-generation professionals are often in uncharted waters**
- **Upcoming summit will promote awareness, jump-start the conversation**

IN FOCUS: The Department of Commerce is trying to expand the diversity and inclusion conversation with a "cutting edge initiative" to ensure socioeconomic status is considered along with traditional diversity dimensions such as race, ethnicity, gender, and national origin, Tinisha Agramonte, director of the Commerce Department's Office of Civil Rights, told **cyberFEDS**®.

"This is a mission imperative initiative. The executive order that drives government-wide initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion reminds us that 'when we draw on the wisdom of a workforce that reflects the population we serve, we are better able to understand and meet the needs of our customers -- the American people.' So, we have an obligation to ensure we have a diverse, qualified workforce that is drawn from all segments of society, including our socio-economic spectrum," Agramonte said.

The **First Generation** Professionals initiative started off in the Office of Civil Rights as "part of the equal employment opportunity MD 715 barrier analysis we conduct to ensure there is full inclusion for all groups within the Commerce Department's workforce," she said. "We wanted to see if we could support the theory that socioeconomic background did have an impact on inclusion for individuals who come from low-income families and who are one of the first in their immediate families to enter the professional workforce."

Commerce then partnered with the U.S. Census Bureau to conduct a study to see if barriers for first-generational professionals existed.

The study and academic research review supported the fact that the lack of resources available to **first-generation** professionals compared to those from middle- or upper-class families did result in barriers to workplace inclusion and career advancement.

"So now we are trying to start the conversation and raise awareness that socioeconomic background may serve as a barrier in different ways," she said. "For example, with regards to recruitment, there may be an unintentional bias if a hiring official has a fixed idea of what the best and brightest looks like. If completing an undergraduate degree in four years from a top ranked university, coupled with coveted unpaid internships, are the only criteria, that lens may prevent us from getting a first generational professional because the research shows that most FGPs have a nontraditional academic path."

Agramonte added that "If an FGP had to work their way through school, it may have taken them longer to complete their degree and limited their ability to take unpaid or low paying internships. So, instead of seeing that path as a negative, we want the hiring official to expand their lens to see and value the grit, tenacity, and strong work ethic FGPs demonstrated and that they will bring those same traits to the workforce, in addition to the requisite qualifications."

And even after they get into the workplace, many FGPs may need help and assistance as they try to "ascend the career ladder," because they are often in "uncharted waters" not having the benefit of anyone in their immediate family to provide guidance based on their own experiences or social capital to help them, Agramonte said.

"Sometimes when having the diversity conversation, some perceive we are giving a handout or lowering our qualification standards," she said. "Absolutely not. We still want a qualified workforce. ... We just want to expand the lens through which people view what makes someone qualified. The best and brightest come in many diverse packages."

FGPs, she said, "also come from a large segment of the population we serve, so they have a keen understanding of that population and bring cultural competence which can help us improve the products and services we deliver to them."

HR, diversity and inclusion, and EEO professionals can help the effort, Agramonte said, by raising awareness and "energizing" diversity and inclusion efforts to ensure socioeconomic status is considered as a "diversity dimension." They should also review policies, practices, and procedures to ensure there are no impediments to equal opportunity in both recruitment and advancement opportunities.

Upcoming summit

To help jump-start the conversation, the Commerce Department is hosting the federal government's first-ever [First Generation Professionals Summit](#) on Sept. 12.

"The goal is to highlight the powerful stories of these family trailblazers, inspire other FGPs, and to make sure we increase hiring officials' awareness of biases, unconscious and conscious, that may prevent the full and fair consideration of FGPs and to discuss workplace inclusion opportunities to unleash the full potential of FGPs," Agramonte said.

Speakers include U.S. Treasurer Jovita Carranza, a **first-generation** professional herself who rose to the top -- from a night shift box handler for UPS to the treasurer of the United States, and Rukayatu "Ruky" Tijani, founder of the **First Generation** Professionals Project.

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