

ACE Mentor Program builds a path to a fully representative workforce

By ANGELA GOTTULA
ACE Mentor Program of Washington

Design and construction firms, no doubt well-intentioned with strategic diversity and representation goals, are limited by the pool of applicants. It is not possible to hire more employees with diverse backgrounds if there are too few to hire. The path to a fully representative workforce started five, 10, even 15 years ago, and similarly, representation among tomorrow's workforce starts today.



Gottula

Enter the ACE Mentor Program of Washington, one of 75-plus nationwide ACE affiliates, which has been building the local workforce for more than 20 years. ACE primarily serves Puget Sound high school students interested in architecture, construction, and engineering career exploration. By our estimates, 4,500-plus students have been exposed to AEC careers through the program, with several hundred earning scholarships to study at universities around the world and several dozen returning to work for the firms that mentored them. ACE works!

While ACE casts a wide net for recruitment and all high school students may join the free program (350 students from 74 area high schools, so far this year), recently there has been greater effort to reach students with backgrounds underrepresented in the industry. In many ways, ACE has seen great success; in other ways, there is still much to do.

WOMEN IN STEM

ACE recognizes young women are often overlooked for STEM career pathways. Nationally, young women in ACE have been



Two young women headed for Syracuse and Tulane universities receive ACE scholarships in 2022. ACE has worked to expand its reach to young women and students with diverse backgrounds. Photo by Matt Waller

steadily increasing and are now just above 40%; locally, young women comprise 46% of current applicants. In the last three years, 47 local students were awarded \$385,000 in ACE scholarships; of those, an impressive 53% were young women.

While there is hope for the reach of ACE with these statistics, a closer look offers a different, sobering view: a meager 24% of female scholarship recipients plan to pursue engineering.

In 2022, ACE was honored to receive a sizable gift from Magnusson Klemencic Associates in honor of principal and owner Shelley Clark upon her retirement, and Shelley matched the donation. With these funds, ACE seeded the first endowment of any ACE program in the nation and dedicated it to the advancement of women in engineering.

Rebecca Welch, project manager at Affiliated Engineers Inc., leads the committee to manage this effort.

"Growing up, I never met any women engineers and didn't

know it was a career option," Rebecca said. "I was lucky that my father gave me the idea to go to engineering school because I was good at math and science. I am passionate about introducing young women to the field of engineering, and this endowment is a way we can do that."

GENDER DIVERSITY

Just five years ago, the only options related to gender on the ACE application were "male" and "female." The addition of "prefer to self describe as" seemed like a small step but opened up the opportunity for ACE to better understand the students. While the exact number of gender-diverse students isn't known, ACE presented its first scholarship to a non-binary student in 2020 and sent a non-binary student to a national ACE summer camp in 2023. Last year, 2% of students completing ACE identified as non-binary, while a 2021 National Institute of Health study reported the percentage among teens could be as high as 10%.

K Kaczmarek, associate interior designer at Mithun, is the only open trans architect at their firm and one of just a few gender-diverse mentors with ACE. K recalls attending an ACE event where a father noticed "they/them" pronouns on K's name badge and introduced his child. The student connected with K,



An ACE student works with a mentor on a project design. ACE is recruiting mentors and student advocates for 2023-2024. Most urgently, mechanical and electrical mentors as well as mentors from Bellevue and Tacoma are needed. Photo courtesy the ACE program



ACE students learn different strengths of concrete by casting and breaking concrete blocks. ACE introduces students to careers in architecture, interiors, landscape architecture, civil/structural engineering, mechanical/electrical engineering, and construction management. Photo courtesy the ACE program

joined the Mithun team, and was able to visualize a career as an architect during ACE. This unique mentoring relationship was possible in part because representation matters.

"Visibility and representation

would have made a huge difference in my career path growing up," K said. "When I meet students who share a similar identity as myself, it fills me with so much joy, especially in a time when trans youth are

in such a precarious situation in their lives. It is important to show young people that one, adult trans people exist and are thriving, and two, they can love

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Absher recently hosted its annual Small-Business Summit luncheon celebrating women entrepreneurs in the construction industry. Photo from Absher Construction

5 not-so-secret tips for winning work

By STEPHANIE CALDWELL and ERIN MAYER
Absher Construction

As a general contractor, the No. 1 question small, disadvantaged and diverse subcontractors ask Absher is, "How do I get work with your company?" There is no secret handshake or magic word to being awarded contracts — we want to work with a diverse group of subcontractors that contributes to our projects' successes and mirrors the communities which we serve.



Caldwell



Mayer

The best way to win work with Absher, or any general contractor, is to be prepared not just in technical expertise of your

trade, but also in your understanding of the contracting processes, specific project requirements, external resources, and how to leverage your current contracts into future work.

Last month, Absher hosted our annual Small-Business Summit luncheon celebrating women entrepreneurs in the construction industry. Our panel of female project managers shared their top advice to the attendees, and their top five not-so-secret tips can benefit any small, diverse business entity:

1 GET ALL CERTIFICATIONS YOU'RE QUALIFIED FOR

While many clients support diverse contracting and have specific project goals for SBE, DBE, M/WBE, veteran-owned contracting, they do not all use the same system(s) for determining which firms meet their requirements.

The Office of Minority & Women's Business Enterprises (OMWBE) is a great first stop for certification in Washington state. Many municipalities, agencies, and even private clients recognize OMWBE certification. Some, such as King County, Sound Tran-

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CELEBRATING
CONSTRUCTION INCLUSION WEEK!

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION





In Seattle, participants of Skanska's 10-week Construction Management Building Blocks training program learned how to be more competitive.

Photo from Skanska

Building a culture of inclusion inside and out

By JOYCELYN YUE
Skanska

Attracting, retaining and developing the best talent — in the construction industry and every industry — will only happen when companies fully embrace the importance of diversity and inclusion (D&I) not just during one specific week, but 365 days a year. It's more than just understanding the concepts that's critical; it's putting in the work to make a real difference that matters.



Yue

That's why I'm particularly proud of what Skanska is doing in Seattle and nationally to continue to build and foster a culture of inclusion both internally and externally.

INVESTING IN INCLUSION NATIONALLY

Skanska has been making strides to grow its inclusion efforts nationally. When I joined the company a year ago as national director of supplier diversity, my job was to help lead our supplier diversity professionals from 23 different offices and to focus and sharpen our work. I'm thrilled with what we've accomplished and with our ability to onboard additional regional and local team members to continue to strengthen this important work.

This year, Dina Clark our senior vice president for D&I at Skanska USA Building, added two new roles to help achieve our internal and external diversity and inclusion goals. Ayesha Adams was named the first-ever national director of culture and engagement for Skanska USA Building. In her new role, Ayesha is responsible for expanding the company's internal D&I infrastructure and engagement efforts, enabling leadership to continuously drive higher levels of engagement and cultural efforts anchored around Skanska's core values.

Also this year, Skanska named its first national director of inclusion and partnerships, Kelly Daige. Kelly is focused on building and integrating our relation-

ships with key external organizations and networks in the D&I space and helping us develop metrics around community and employee engagement. Through more diverse partnerships, sponsorships, participation in panel discussions and ongoing dialogue about how to be better partners with suppliers, we hope to broaden our supply chain pool.

4-PART SUPPLIER DIVERSITY FIELD EXECUTION PLAN

Skanska's Seattle office has been intentional about its D&I efforts. This includes the creation of a D&I council and formally established diverse supplier spend goals. The Seattle office has established DB (diverse business) goals for all its projects to ensure that its procurement and subcontracting actions more accurately reflect the make-up of the community at large.

To help achieve that goal, the office has established a formal supplier diversity field execution plan that is comprised of four main sections:

- Intentional procurement and subcontracting
- Community engagement and training/development
- Bidding process with diverse business maximization
- Compliance, tracking and reporting

Each of these sections has three to six sub-sections that include multiple elements, resources and action items. It is a comprehensive and robust plan that can become a model for other offices around the country.

Our program has become a part of our culture. It's not about finding a lumber or steel supplier who meets the federal DB definition; rather, Skanska is looking at suppliers across all our professional service groups throughout the company. That's because we believe D&I is not the job of just the people who have those three letters in their title; it's everyone's responsibility.

Courtney Goldstein, manager of supplier diversity in Seattle, who developed the supplier diversity execution plan, has held three in-person trainings with Skanska team members in the few weeks. More than 40 people, including project engineers, project managers, project executives and all levels in between, have completed the program, and feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

DIVERSIFYING SUPPLIERS ACROSS THE INDUSTRY

Working with a diverse set of suppliers is a great first step for any company. What I'm excited about is the work we've undertaken to actively recruit small, traditionally marginalized minority-owned businesses and train them on how to work not just with us, but also on how to grow their business with any general contractor. That's what Skanska's Construction Management Building Blocks (CMBB) training program is designed to do.

Established more than 15 years ago, CMBB teaches small businesses how to be more competitive in the market, because we believe that our entire industry will benefit from a stronger and more diverse set of suppliers. The 10-week CMBB program provides instruction from both Skanska and other industry professionals on topics ranging from business development and estimating to project planning, bonding and more.

In spring 2023, for the first time ever, all Skanska Western Region

offices coordinated their CMBB programs on the same topics and schedules, allowing participants thousands of miles apart to learn from Skanska professionals across five offices through synchronized virtual learning platforms. While most of the education sessions were virtual to allow for more participation across the region, two of the 10 sessions were held at local Skanska offices (including Seattle and Portland) with opportunities to meet and network with office leadership and project teams in person.

Our initiatives and efforts through CMBB and numerous local outreach events have allowed us to pre-qualify more than 40 diverse local firms and thereby expand our database of certified and pre-qualified DBs. Many suppliers who have gone through CMBB have been able to build capacity and strengthen their businesses, leading to the growth of supplier diversity across the marketplace.

Alivia Thomas, chief operations officer at Keeping Up With the Jones landscaping, based in Salem, Oregon, shared that her firm has been able to win more

business because they were able to learn more about the bidding process.

"CMBB was an invaluable business experience that I will take with me for the rest of my professional career," said Alivia. "As a young woman of color in the construction industry, there are, what feels like, infinite barriers to success and permanence. Skanska's course for construction management is a masterclass on running a successful project from bid invitation, all the way to the closing paperwork."

Alivia added that as a direct result of participating in CMBB, Keeping Up With the Jones has signed more than \$1 million worth of commercial construction contracts.

"This program is a must for any small business looking for in-depth knowledge on seamlessly running a project from start-to-finish," added Alivia. "I cannot thank Skanska enough for making this program available and free!"

Like Alivia, building a business takes hard work, but in the end, it pays off. Building a culture of inclusion also takes hard work,

and that's why it's so important that we all do our part. Our companies, our industry and we as individuals will be better for it as a result.

Inclusion and diversity are about putting in the work and making a real difference that matters. A great first step is for companies big and small to identify what we all can do around core ideas like: commitment and accountability; belonging; supplier diversity; workplace culture; and community engagement. Having a specific week where we elevate the conversation as part of an effort to address D&I opportunities in boardrooms, offices and jobsites nationwide shows me that as an industry, we're on the right path and I can't help but get excited about where we go from here.

Joycelyn Yue is national director of supplier diversity at Skanska, where she leads a national supplier diversity team of professionals in 23 offices. Yue partners with regional and national leadership to further develop and elevate the company's Supplier Diversity Compliance program. Yue is based Los Angeles.



OCTOBER 16-20, 2023

INCLUSION



Join us for 2023 Construction Inclusion Week

Further your commitment to Culture of CARE by participating in Construction Inclusion Week, October 16-20.

AGC members all across America are taking part in **Construction Inclusion Week** -- a crucial opportunity for the construction industry to come together and actively support diversity and inclusion. AGC's Culture of CARE program is offering a four-part webinar series -- *Navigating the Journey to a Culture of CARE in Construction* -- supporting each of Construction Inclusion Week's five daily themes:

Commitment & Accountability, Belonging, Supplier Diversity, Workplace Culture and Community Engagement.

For more information, please visit www.constructioninclusionweek.com, or scan the QR code here to participate in the series.





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Secret tips

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sit, Seattle Colleges, and the Port of Seattle utilize King County's Small Contractors and Suppliers (SCS) certification, and federal projects for the Department of Defense and Department of Transportation utilize the Small Business Administration's (SBA) small-business criteria.

Securing as many certifications as you are able to will help increase your opportunities and competitiveness.

2 UNDERSTAND EACH PROCUREMENT TYPE

Hard-bid, private/negotiated, GC/CM, and design-build contracts each come with their own requirements for qualifications, bidding, bonding, and compliance. The AGC of Washington offers classes and workshops that delve into the nuances of alternative public contracting and can help you successfully navigate unfamiliar territory. Understanding requirements will help ensure your bid or estimate will not be disqualified for a paperwork error or regulatory compliance issues.

3 KNOW THY SELF

This is the seemingly obvious, but is actually a delicate balancing act between stretching to grow your company and staying within your own parameters for being successful. Ask yourself questions such as, "Is this scope within our firm's expertise?" Sometimes scopes of work can bleed into one another, and ensuring you're prepared to execute the full scope or sub-tier aspects you cannot perform is key to answering this question. "Do we understand the market sector?" Flooring in a school can have much different specifications than flooring in a health care environment. "Can we be successful in this location?" Sometimes geography presents challenges unrelated to your technical expertise; circumstances such as distance from your office, waterfront adjacency; or lack of on-site storage can result in extra costs.

Answering "no" to any of these questions doesn't automatically mean you shouldn't pursue a project. It does mean you should have an open dialogue with the general contractor to see how they can support you in stretching to grow your capacity, and do your due diligence to ensure your resources and pricing are sufficient to help you succeed in performing the work.

4 USE YOUR RESOURCES

There are many free and low-cost resources available to diverse contractors. Organizations such as Tabor 100, Washington Minority Business Development Agency, University of Washington's Foster School of Business's Ascend program, Small Business Administration, and APEX Accelerators offer a wide-variety of trainings, guidance, and other resources to help grow your business.

General contractors are your

friends, too! Absher offers access to our in-house Absher University trainings, hosts outreach events for upcoming projects, and facilitates small-business summits focused on individual contracting topics like safety and bonding — all free of cost. Clients such as Tacoma Public Schools host networking events to connect general contractors and small-business contractors.

Take advantage of all of these opportunities. You'll build your knowledge and your relationships with key contacts at the same time.

5 EXECUTE AND FOLLOW UP

Congratulations, you've been awarded a contract — know it's your time to shine! Pay attention to details; you're running every aspect of the work so be sure to read contracts carefully and know what regulatory requirements apply. Don't be afraid of requirements such as prevailing wage. Taking on bigger projects with such requirements is an opportunity to learn and grow. Staying relevant with industry best practices and technology will ensure your longevity.

Be proactive in discussing concerns with your general contractor before they become problems. We want you to succeed, and can often offer support to address challenges you may be facing such as managing cash flow, scheduling for staffing capacity, or meeting safety standards. If you do experience bumps in the road, document lessons learned and how you'll address those on future work.

Your performance on your current job will have a great impact on your future opportunities. Developing a great reputation and relationships with estimators, project managers, and superintendents will give you free word-of-mouth marketing and recommendations. Once your work is complete, follow-up with the contacts you developed to ensure your firm is in their database and inquire about upcoming work. Acknowledge all bid notifications and, if you are unable to bid or a project isn't right for you, explain that and clarify what types of work you are looking to pursue.

Communicate, communicate, communicate. All of these tips rely on communication between your firm and Absher, or any general contractor. When we have transparency of your needs we can offer the support, guidance, and resources that will help us all achieve our goals. Your success is our success and, most importantly, the project's success.

Stephanie Caldwell is director of diversity, equity and community engagement at Absher Construction. Caldwell pioneered diverse business subcontracting 25 years ago, and her career has been dedicated to outreach, promotion, and advocating for small, minority-, women-, and veteran-owned businesses. Erin Mayer is director of marketing at Absher. Mayer leads all communications and marketing, and serves on the firm's Racial Equity Advisory Council.

Mentor

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what they do. ACE has been one of my favorite parts of being in this industry."

STUDENT ADVOCACY

In 2020, ACE formally launched a multi-pronged initiative to recruit and retain students from diverse backgrounds or areas historically underrepresented in ACE and the industry. There has been success! Last year, retention among four of the largest targeted Seattle schools was 71%, even better than the entire program retention. Of the 2023 scholarship winners, 50% were Black, Asian, or Latino.

One particularly successful outreach effort is ACE's student advocacy program. Many students — such as diverse students, young women, or neurodivergent learners — are given or request an "ACE Advocate," a volunteer outside of the student's mentor team who acts as a cheerleader or ACE coach, helping students to feel welcome, know where and when meetings are, and have a reliable place to get advice. Last year, 51% of students with Advocates completed ACE, a 6% increase over the prior year.

Cheryl Jacobs, associate principal at NAC Architecture, has served as an Advocate since 2020.

"Volunteering as an Advocate is like no other role I have had before," she said. "An Advocate is invited to get to know high school youth like a counselor, mentor, or friend. Each student I engage with is different, has different things they want to talk about or ask. Some need help solely with logistics and reminders, some ask big picture questions about careers. It has been a great experience to serve as a scaffold to youth who are exploring their identities and interests."

Nationwide, the ACE program celebrates an ACE Day of Action, which this year is Oct. 20. We challenge all Puget Sound AEC professionals to show support and participate in the Day of Action in any number of creative ways. Sign up as a mentor or Advocate, join a committee, make a donation, bring an idea to life, or commit to change the path for a student. ACE is making a difference in our industry but there is more work to do, and we could use you.

Angela Gottula is executive director of the ACE Mentor Program of Washington.

Subcontractors

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THE RIGHT OPPORTUNITY

Last year, at an industry event hosted by Microsoft as part of its Crafting Futures Together courses, I met Nathaniel Hartley, longtime owner of Portland's Professional Lath and Plaster and a 40-year industry veteran.

Nathaniel's growing company is the only Black union signatory of its kind in the Pacific Northwest and has had a hand in completing a variety of high-profile projects over the years: schools, courthouses, airport terminals, Portland high-rises and more.

We got to talking about our shared love of music — I play the guitar and Nathaniel is an accomplished vocalist — before turning to work. Nathaniel offered the names of minority-owned subs in his network, and several of them have since been hired on Lewis projects.

Recently, we invited Professional Lath and Plaster to partner with us on a technology client's campus refresh on the Eastside. It would be an opportunity for Nathaniel to expand his business into Washington, where the company had worked previously. After further reflection and discussions with the owner, however, we agreed it would be better to wait for the right project, one with adequate margins and that would not expose our partner to unnecessary risk.

Since then, Nathaniel has sought my advice when he's had contract questions. I've also learned about some of the challenges he's faced in growing his business, like bonding requirements that presuppose access to capital that many minority-owned companies have historically struggled to access in the first place.

We've committed to partnering with Professional Lath and Plaster the next time the right project scope comes around, which Nathaniel can use to move his business forward.

In a broader sense, we're interested in doing more than simply achieving a percentage goal on our projects. Those goals don't speak to a business' health as a company. Instead, we're working to achieve those goals by making the businesses on our team more successful.

CREATING LASTING IMPACT

Jimmy and I continue to meet every few weeks, whether it's to talk generally about how our projects are going, or for one-on-one business coaching.

While chatting the other day, Jimmy shared that he recently drove past the Fred Hutch campus and found himself exclaiming "Wow!" It hit him there in the driver's seat: that Ahora, the company he built, was playing a direct role in a vital institution's success.

As I look back on my 26 years at Lewis and counting, a variety of big and meaningful projects come to mind. Yet, it's the time spent getting to know people like Jimmy and Nathaniel, and the experience of supporting the success of their businesses, that have been just as gratifying.

Jay Sorensen is president of Lease Crutcher Lewis' Washington division.