

REPRESENT

More DEI Equals Smarter Diplomacy

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Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. In this article, Abigail Golden-Vazquez writes about how impactful representation is for the Foreign Service and diplomacy writ large. Critically, Golden-Vazquez provides solutions and policy improvements that will improve leadership, recruitment, and retention.

Study after study shows more diverse organizations are more effective and innovative, and less likely to succumb to group think; yet we stifle our greatest asset—our diversity—to our own detriment. A more diverse foreign affairs apparatus is not just a noble thing to strive for, it's a matter of U.S. global competitiveness and national security.

While the corporate world has awakened to the fact that diversity is good for business, the foreign affairs field remains decades behind. Corporations are no panacea of diversity, especially at c-suite and board levels, but the highest performing companies are invested in pursuing inclusion strategies and devising ways to incentivize better outcomes.¹ In government foreign affairs field remains largely white, male, and elite. Foundations, non-profits, think tanks and policy institutes which help to inform and shape policy look pretty similar. It's as if the domain of foreign affairs remains frozen in the 1950s.

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 7 percent of the overall Foreign Service is Hispanic and 7 percent Black—significantly below each group's share of the U.S. labor force at 18 percent² and 12.6 percent³ respectively.”⁴ A 2020 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on diversity at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) showed little improvement from 2002-2018 with a small increase in overall diversity from 33 percent to 37 percent, but with Black employees down five points and Hispanics up from just 3 percent to 6 percent.⁵ The same study found that racially and ethnically diverse professionals were 31-41 percent less likely to be promoted than non-Hispanic whites.

By 2060, nearly one third of the overall U.S. population will be Latino⁶ and by 2045 the United States is projected to become a majority non-Hispanic white nation.⁷ In a democratic nation, it can no longer be justified for the “emerging majority” to be excluded from important leadership and decision-making roles that promise better outcomes for everyone. Rep. Joaquín Castro—lead author of the [Diversity and Inclusion at the Department of State Act](#)—calls the diversity gap “a generational crisis in American diplomacy.” U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield and CIA Director William Burns argue that the lack of diversity in the diplomatic corps is a national security crisis.⁸

As a Latina international relations professional with 30 plus years of public, private, and non-profit sector experience, lack of diversity in the foreign affairs workforce has been the one constant in my career. To combat this, I offer solutions in three key areas: Leadership, Recruitment and Retention, and Accountability.

LEADERSHIP MATTERS

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) need to be widely understood and embraced from the top down and throughout all levels of career status. It must be internalized as mission critical diplomatic and national security priorities rather than as something nice to do, or arbitrarily imposed upon already stretched staff. Under the late Secretary of State Collin Powell, diversity increased while under Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, it declined. Only when leadership models D&I authentically and ensures that it flows through all aspects of organizations, will real progress happen. Diversity without inclusion is a recipe for failure. When talented diverse professionals make it through door, if they aren't welcomed or heard, are relegated to certain jobs, or don't see a merit-based pathway forward, they will find another "table" where their contributions *are* appreciated.

Leaders set the tone for organizational culture and there must be zero-tolerance for discriminatory behavior, such as bullying and harassment. A recent McKinsey report described the conditions that facilitate D&I as an environment of equality, openness, and belonging.⁹

Solutions:

- D&I should be treated as mission critical led by example from the top down
- Compensation and promotions should factor in actions taken to improve diversity outcomes on clearly set goals.
- Build a culture that welcomes resistance as well as an authentic understanding of cultural bias.
- Discourage corridor reputation-based advancement that mirrors existing leadership.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Foreign affairs is not an accessible career path to much of America. Work must be done to help more young people imagine themselves in foreign affairs careers. The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST) does just that through its innovative curriculum tailored to middle school and high school students.

Recruitment without a plan for retention is another recipe for failure. Too often the pipeline is blamed for the lack of diversity. This can't be the only challenge when there is much greater diversity at lower levels or in specific types of professions, but diversity remains sparse as you go up the chain.

While programs like the [Payne](#), [Pickering](#) and [Rangel](#) Fellowships provide important pathways into the foreign service for underrepresented racial and ethnic groups; promotion and retention is a challenge. Many Fellows have shared being on the receiving end of disparaging remarks from peers and seniors. They feel they are brought in, but no investment is made in their success and there is frustration when they leave. A recent informal survey of FSOs of color found 80 percent witnessed or experienced discrimination and 90 percent experienced micro-aggressions.

Many Latinos, and other diverse groups, serve as the interlocutors, translators, and cultural navigators for family members and for themselves bringing multi-level cultural competence¹⁰ and country specific knowledge. These are all valuable skillsets for careers in foreign affairs and need to be recognized as such in recruitment and in advancement opportunity.

Solutions:

- Offer paid internships for more equitable opportunities to gain experience.
- Expand recruitment geographically and beyond the usual schools to include community colleges, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Historically Black Serving Institutions, Native Reservations, and schools for the site and hearing impaired. Tap into organizations like Latinos in Foreign Policy and the International Career Advancement Program (ICAP) which maintain excellent vetted talent banks.
- Recognize the added value that diverse perspectives bring as an asset and reward accordingly.
- Create a Posse¹¹ like program to provide peer support to diverse employees.

INCENTIVIZE AND HOLD ACCOUNTABLE

Efforts to secure more diversity and inclusion, must be funded, tracked, understood, improved upon, recognized, and rewarded to be effective. A Harvard Business Review essay by David Padulla, Diversity and Inclusion Efforts that Really Work¹² says you must collect, count, and compare. 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 increase accountability and transparency around diversity issues. They can also provide insight on what is working for which groups and what is not, allowing organizations to adjust accordingly.

Solutions:

- Tie compensation and promotion to achieving clearly set D&I goals. During review process ask about specific actions taken to advance D&I as you would on connections made or other steps taken to advance the mission.
- Disaggregate collection of diversity data by type (gender, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, socioeconomic circumstance, etc.) so you can understand and address specific concerns.

There is no shortage of great ideas and solutions out there. It is easy to say what should happen, but without leadership and financial support, the best ideas remain just ideas. The case for diversity and inclusion has been made for decades. To truly take hold, mindsets, habits, and incentives must change, implicit and explicit bias must be recognized and overcome, structural barriers must be removed, and outcomes measured. This will require greater transparency and accountability, sustained leadership, and profound and relentless organizational and financial commitment over the long haul. It is not easy, but we can't afford not to do it.

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Author

Abigail Golden-Vazquez is a consultant, the founding executive director of the Aspen Institute Latinos and Society Program, and an expert in Equitable Economic Advancement, Latino Entrepreneurship and International Affairs and Communications. As founding executive Director of the Aspen Institute Latinos and Society Program (AILAS) 2015-2020, Abigail launched a new policy program focused on the critical importance the growing Latino population to the continued success of US democracy and economic well-being. AILAS under her leadership promoted policies and actions that advance Latinos in service to the collective good of the nation. AILAS also provides scholarships to strengthen Latino leadership and participation in a wide array of Aspen Institute programs. A major accomplishment of her tenure was the founding the Forum on Latino Business Growth, a cross-sector, multiethnic consortium of ecosystem leaders in the business development space dedicated scaling Latino-owned businesses to close the \$1.47 trillion dollar opportunity gap.

For 8 years prior Abigail developed and managed the Institute's geographical (Africa, Central America, India, Middle East, and China) and topical leadership initiatives (education and environment) that comprise the Aspen Global Leadership Network with the goal of stimulating a new generation of leaders poised to play a greater role in the societal engagement of their countries. As a vice president at the Aspen Institute, she was a member of the executive management team working on strategy and representing the Institute publicly. Abigail joined the Aspen Institute from the German Marshall Fund (GMF) in 2006 where she was a senior manager and director of external relations responsible for partnership development, congressional relations, and public outreach.

Abigail holds a B.A. in Political Science and Spanish from Amherst College and an M.A. in International Relations and Latin American Studies from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. She is a National Hispana Leadership Institute Executive Leadership Fellow and an International Career Advancement Program Fellow. She has attended leadership training at the Center for Creative Leadership and at Harvard Kennedy School.

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⁹ “Diversity wins: How inclusion matters,” McKinsey.

¹⁰ 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, and gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views.

¹¹ 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.

¹² David Pedulla, “Diversity and Inclusion Efforts That Really Work,” Harvard Business Review, May 12, 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/05/diversity-and-inclusion-efforts-that-really-work>.