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DEIA Knowledge Prepares Lawyers to Provide Justice to All

Intentional education about diversity, equity, inclusion, and access is vital for lawyers to practice competently.

In my years in State Bar of Wisconsin leadership roles, I have focused on diversity. Sometimes people ask me why. Here are a few reasons why diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) matter.

The world is changing. No longer are clients a homogeneous group. Many ethnicities, racial groups, religions, and gender identities are represented. Similarly, coworkers and people we interact with in courtrooms, boardrooms, corporations, and governmental entities are diverse.

Lawyers are ethically obligated to practice competently. Doing so includes understanding the people we are serving, the courts we appear before, and the lawyers with whom we work. We pledge in the lawyers' oath to avoid "offensive personality." This means not doing or saying things that we should know are offensive to others. To comply with these mandates, we must be educated about other people's perspectives. We need to understand how the language we use matters. People might have disabilities, but they are not defined as disabled. Not everyone celebrates Christian holidays. Some people might celebrate Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, or Eid al-Adha or not celebrate any holidays.

Lawyers can educate themselves about diversity and how a client's background might shape the advice given to the client. Lawyers should be culturally competent and recognize the limits of their own perspectives. I can help a client better navigate a custody dispute if I understand the client's background, such as facets of Hmong or Muslim culture.

We must purposefully educate ourselves about diversity, not rely on intuition, and be able to recognize when our backgrounds might constrain our advice. This education will make us more effective lawyers, regardless of the setting in which we practice. The State Bar has filed a petition with the Wisconsin Supreme Court seeking permission for continuing legal education (CLE) credit for DEIA training that relates not only to ethics but also to the substantive practice of law. See Petition 22-01, <https://www.wicourts.gov/scrules/pending/2201.htm>. The petition asks the court to allow attorneys to earn CLE credits for taking DEIA training courses, not to require attorneys to take such courses.

DEIA training encourages treating other people with respect. I was taught not to assume someone was married. Nor should we assume that all people are straight or cisgendered. It is more polite to let an individual tell you which pronoun to use or what role the individual has in the legal process.

Lawyers also should encourage and support diversity in our profession. Without this change, the legal profession will stagnate, and lawyers will be replaced by legal-services providers who have more cultural competence or insight regarding the public. There are shortages of attorneys in many locations, and there is plenty of work for everyone who becomes a lawyer.

We must support the careers of lawyers who come from different backgrounds, races, and abilities and bring their own perspectives to legal work. This means hiring, mentoring, promoting, and giving opportunities to diverse attorneys. And it means understanding the diverse perspectives of those we serve every day to be competent, capable lawyers. **WL**