

# 2009 Diversity in the Workplace

## Rights Bill Adds Sexual Orientation Prohibiting job discrimination

Oregon's newest senator, Jeff Merkley, joined fellow Democrat Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and Republicans Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe of Maine, last week by introducing the Employment Non-Discrimination Act to prohibit job discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. They were joined in this effort by 34 other members of the Senate, including Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore.

"There is no place in the workplace for employment discrimination," said Merkley. "No worker in America should be fired or denied a job based on who they are. Discrimination is wrong, period. I'm proud to join Senator Kennedy, who is a civil rights legend, and Senators Collins and Snowe, both champions for equality, in taking this next step in our ongoing effort to create a more perfect union and guarantee every American, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, the right to earn a living."

Similar to current law in several states and the policies of many Fortune 500 companies, the proposal would close an important gap in federal civil rights laws by making it illegal to discriminate in employment based on sexual orientation.

"Our legislation affirms the principle that individuals should be judged on their skills and abilities, and not by who they are," said Collins.

Kennedy said, "The promise of America will never be fulfilled as long as justice is denied to even one among us. The Employment Non-Discrimination Act brings us

closer to fulfilling that promise for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender citizens. I'm proud to join Senators Merkley, Collins and Snowe in introducing this important legislation."

Snowe said the proposed legislation was long overdue.

"We cannot continue to allow two standards of rights in the workplace, based on sexual orientation or identity," Snowe said. "Ensuring equality for all Americans is the least we can do in living up to the standards of inclusion that this nation is



Jeff Merkley

built upon. There is no place for discriminating against any of our citizens for whatever reason and I commend my colleagues for their willingness to champion equal rights for every American."

The act would prohibit employers, employment agencies, labor organizations and joint labor-management committees from firing, refusing to hire, or discriminating against those employed or seeking employment, on the basis of their perceived or actual sexual orientation or gender identity. Such protections are already in place prohibiting discrimination based on race, religion, gender, national origin, age, and disability.

## A Path to Upward Mobility

What is it that makes an economic recovery? While there are many signs read by economists and pundits that can foretell the end of a downturn — retail sales, orders for durable goods, the mood of the investor class, and the like — the true health of the economy is measured in jobs. And by that metric, the recovery has yet to begin.

Many Americans — too many — are still out of work. And the reality is that even when the recovery begins — when the economy starts adding jobs rather than losing them — many of the jobs that once formed the backbone of the American working class won't be there anymore.

For the most part, middle-class Americans no longer work in factories, or in lumber mills, or in steel mills. For decades now, we have been transitioning away from a manufacturing-based economy to a "post-industrial," service-based economy.

So those determined and motivated citizens who are currently unable to find gainful employment face a dilemma. Where do you obtain the marketable skills necessary to hop on the recovery bandwagon once jobs start to become more available? How do you train to participate in the forthcoming energy and transportation infrastructure projects envisioned by the Obama Administration? How do you prepare to enter a ca-

## Cascade Connections

BY ALGIE C. GATEWOOD



reer in a cutting-edge and in-demand field?

The answer to all these questions is the same — community college, of course.

In one respect, this answer is no surprise. Higher education has always been the path to gainful employment, upward economic mobility, and professional satisfaction. And community colleges have long been the most affordable and accessible means of entry into the world of higher

new spending to help prepare the nation's workforce for cutting-edge and in-demand occupations.

Take the health care industry, for example. According to the state of Oregon, health services is one of the fastest-growing fields in the Portland area. At Portland Community College's Cascade Campus, where I am campus president, students can earn a certificate in Medical Assisting in as little as 12 months.

apprenticeships, and the campus also offers students the opportunity to further specialize their skills through the Trades and Industry program.

Of course, these are but two of the many options available at Cascade Campus and other community college campuses around the region. In many cases, students can fully prepare for entry into a gainful occupation in two years of study or less. And you can elect to transfer to a four-year college or university if you have your sights set even higher on the educational ladder. The best way to learn more about your options is to visit your local community college campus and make an appointment with an academic advisor. At the same time, visit a financial aid counselor to find out how to make it work.

So there's no reason to despair if you happen to find yourself out of work, and there's no reason to feel that you have no control over your situation or your future. You can take control, you can plan for the future, you can put yourself in a position where employers are competing over your skills. This economic downturn might be the most severe in recent memory, but it too will pass. The question is — will you be ready when it does?

Algie C. Gatewood, Ed.D., is president of Portland Community College's Cascade Campus.

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education.

But viewed through the prism of today's economic difficulties, community college is even more of a positive resource than it historically has been. People who are out of work often don't have the luxury of taking a longer-term approach to education. People need jobs sooner rather than later and in many cases community college is exactly the right solution.

And you don't have to take my word for it. President Obama recently proposed \$12 billion in

The construction industry is another good example. The state of Oregon also rates construction among the fastest-growing industries in the Portland area. Through Cascade Campus' Skill Center and Evening Trades Apprenticeship Preparation programs — both of which are extremely low-cost options — students can prepare for a skilled construction job in as few as 11 weeks.

Both programs qualify their graduates for immediate application for state-certified trade

## Ground Lost on Corporate Boards

### Fewer seats for African Americans

A recent study of the boards of directors of Fortune 500 companies has found that the number of board seats held by African-Americans has declined since an inaugural report in 2004.

The Executive Leadership Council says the per-

centage of African-Americans on corporate boards decreased from 8.1 in 2004 to 7.4 percent in 2008. Four years ago, African-Americans held 449 corporate board seats and today they hold 413.

The importance of diversity on corporate boards is likely to become more apparent as organizations recognize that changing demographics are altering the nation's business needs. Many corporations realize the benefits they have achieved from a diverse workforce and

are beginning to make inroads on their governing boards of directors.

The study shows that the higher an organization is on the Fortune 500 list, the more likely it is to have African-Americans on its board of directors.

"It's been proven again and again that companies with board members who reflect gender and ethnic diversity also tend to have better returns on equity and sales," said Carl Brooks, council president and chief executive officer.

"Businesses understand the economic benefits of diversity. They talk about it, but not all of them have a plan for achieving it. We expect this report to spur meaningful progress in this important area of management and governance."

As a member of the Alliance for Board Diversity, the Executive Leadership Council is a strategic partner with Catalyst, the Hispanic Association for Corporate Responsibility and Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics.

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