



Strategies for a Culturally Competent Region



Grand Haven
Grand Rapids
Holland
Muskegon

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The “*Strategies for a Culturally Competent Region*” report was commissioned by the West Michigan Chamber Coalition in early 2007. The objective of the study was to produce a plan of action for employers and other key stakeholders underscoring the economic and social importance related to workforce diversity and cultural competency. An additional objective was to develop specific strategies for the West Michigan Chamber Coalition and our individual Chambers to support a diverse and culturally competent region.

In 2006 Michigan Future Inc. released the report, “A New Agenda for a New Michigan”. The report states the #1 strategy for Michigan’s economic success includes; “*Being welcoming to all*”. *The places that do the best in attracting talent from anywhere on the planet wins. This means building a culture that condemns rather than tolerates discrimination and segregation, as well as welcoming, with open arms, talented people from outside Michigan.*” At the 2006 Joint Board of Directors Meeting for the Chamber Coalition this report was studied and endorsed. As a result of this action, a major priority for our 2007 work was to develop a plan for the Coalition.

In examining the ideal of cultural competence for West Michigan, the Chamber Coalition worked with focus groups, engaging more than 150 participants, in four major urban areas. The communities represented, through their respective chambers, were:

- Grand Haven/Ferrysburg/Spring Lake
- Grand Rapids
- Holland
- Muskegon

Focus groups were asked to define and explain their understandings of cultural competence. In these discussions, participants wrestled with the idea of a vision of cultural competence, its benefits, responsibility for insuring success, and the current state of cultural competence in West Michigan.

In addition to the 13 focus groups, additional sources used to help define our strategies were:

- Michigan Future Inc. report
- National Urban League report
- Assessment of current efforts within each of the Chambers
- National population statistics and trends

We want to express our appreciation to the following organizations that contributed funding to this project:

- Grand Rapids Community Foundation
- Community Foundation of the Holland Zeeland Area
- Grand Haven Area Community Foundation
- Holland Area Chamber of Commerce
- Community Foundation of Muskegon
- County of Muskegon
- Muskegon Rotary Club
- Alcoa Howmet
- Muskegon Area Chamber of Commerce Foundation
- Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce Foundation

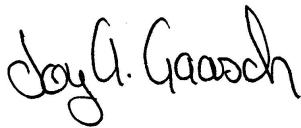
The **West Michigan Chamber Coalition** encourages you to join us in this important work of “being welcoming to all”!



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STRATEGIES FOR A CULTURALLY COMPETENT REGION

Cultural competence within a community is an ideal, a long-sought goal to which the West Michigan Chamber Coalition has devoted considerable resources and passion over the past ten years. With the growth of the region and its surrounding neighboring communities, diversity and inclusion, harmony, and the health and welfare of all have gone beyond being buzzwords, to become true heart-felt desires of our citizens and their leaders. Diversity has become a part of the culture and has developed into a core business strategy. It has grown from a 60's era exhortation of peace and color-blindness to a critical imperative for businesses that intend to succeed in today's America. It is simply not an option for any community or society that wishes to evolve and sustain a credible and respectable presence in the global community.

The business case for West Michigan's cultural competence is evident – both from a micro and a macro perspective. In order to attract the attention of an innovative, talented, diverse workforce, our communities must be a vibrant, entertaining, intellectually stimulating, and sensitive culture, and one that engages in active listening. In order to recruit and retain diverse workers, citizens and their families, it is critical to hear and respond to the beat of an ever-changing population. A successful business climate and the welcoming ambiance of a culturally competent community will continue to draw workers with varied backgrounds and gifts. A successful business climate also fosters creativity, in the form of new products and innovation strategies for business growth. As businesses and communities diversify their populations, improved profits, opportunities, and reputations will lead to greater prosperity for our region. As West Michigan becomes a model for cultural competence, in the region and throughout the country, its influence can only enhance our state's economic climate.

The success of a business that strives for cultural competence will inevitably influence the social climate as well. The social gains that come from the richness of a multicultural community are significant. As the area grows its offerings and reputation in regards to arts, entertainment, culture, tourism, and the like, the population will expand as well. West Michigan will begin to be able to draw from its own for a workforce that is rich and diverse. Ultimately, the two forces, business and social, will feed on and support each other.

It is not a question of whether it would be nice or the right thing to do. West Michigan must continue to mature and broaden its view and its acceptance of businesses, workers and residents of all types. It is critical for the very survival of West Michigan – for our economy, our quality of life, and our continued success as a region.

In continuing the quest toward this goal, the West Michigan Chamber Coalition has considered the following questions and adopts the following principles:

WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

There are many commonly cited characteristics of an ideal and comfortably integrated society: respect, open-mindedness, tolerance, acceptance, celebration and sensitivity among others. Cultural competence also implies an ability to move within and among different cultures with ease. Citizens of a culturally competent society welcome and embrace the existence of various cultures and understand that their culture is one of many.

A culturally competent community has a distinct look. There is easy access to products and services of various ethnic origins. Interaction between cultures is seamless, natural, and harmonious. People work together through participation and collaboration without barriers. A competent community is welcoming and offers a feeling of equality among people. Differences are acknowledged and internalized, but not obtrusive and obvious. A non-judgmental, respectful atmosphere results in a feeling of comfort, safety and home. Within a city, there is a sense of vibrancy and energy as well as a variety of ages, arts and entertainment, products and services, restaurants and languages spoken.

The benefits to a culturally competent community include but are not limited to the economic prosperity that recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce will bring to the area. A greater mixture of cultures brings enhanced social and cultural offerings, including entertainment and the arts, restaurants and hotels, educational resources, products and services, all of which raise the appeal to tourists as well as residents. Less tangibly, cultural competence expands multidimensional thinking, results include, effective problem solving, enhanced perspectives, and forces debate that enlivens and enriches our communities.

HOW CULTURALLY COMPETENT ARE WE NOW?

West Michigan is well known and accepted as being beautiful, conservative, and family-oriented. Many of its communities have a comfortable, small-town feel. However, members of minority communities describe the region as being "nice" but not welcoming, and socially "cliquish". Increased exposure of new ideas, arts, business innovations and visitors can enhance a small town's atmosphere and enrich the lives of its citizens. If accepted with an educated, open-minded perspective, diversity does not have to threaten the order and security of a community. A sincere and welcoming community will, by definition, work to minimize the isolation that may be felt by newcomers, whether their persons of color or single individuals who are trying to find their way in a family-oriented environment.

Many West Michigan communities conduct Institutes for Healing Racism or other educational programs, at local universities, Chambers of Commerce, or social justice organizations. Many support ethnic restaurants, diverse church groups, and various volunteer groups, and promote periodic programs designed for children and adults to grow their individual cultural competence.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ENSURING OUR CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

Those who study and work on this issue agree that it is the responsibility of the entire community and of every citizen and group of citizens to work toward cultural competence. The entities of a community must continually support each other in this effort and be interdependent to accomplish and sustain this environment. The roles of the various players in the execution of a plan to maintain cultural competence are described in this policy statement.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF VARIOUS PARTIES IN ENSURING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Continuing to move toward an increasingly culturally competent community and maintaining that status will be an ongoing task. West Michigan has already made great strides in offering education to citizens, corporations and organizations, and to incorporating these goals into strategic planning documents, policy statements and public communications. Going forward, these programs must be continually enhanced and supplemented.

1. Responsibilities of the Community

The cultural competence of a community has a considerable effect on its quality of life. The social and economic climates are greatly influenced by a community's cultural resources. The community, therefore, plays an important part in ensuring and maintaining this status.

- a) Community agencies should address diversity in their works and in all public communications. Their projects should consider the players involved, the audiences and beneficiaries. All public communications and internal documents should state the agency's goals concerning diversity.
- b) Organizations and corporations should strive to represent the entire community in their membership and on their Boards. Recruitment efforts should be expanded and enhanced, to go beyond mere invitation and, instead, to intentional welcoming.
- c) The community should recognize the efforts of organizations and individuals who contribute toward the development of a culturally competent community. Mentions should be made public in the press and other publications with emphasize on the importance of the contributions.
- d) The community should create and promote committees and/or clubs that discuss and develop lists of educational films, books, or lectures. Citizen study groups

have worked well in the past to mobilize larger groups of citizens to study and analyze these issues. Community groups should develop plans to facilitate individual connections within the community. Examples are: a mentor system, a friendship ring, citizens study groups, connecting people with common interests or on boards with common goals or around common topics.

2. Responsibilities of Employers and Businesses

Employers have the opportunity to make a strong impression in this area. They can lead by example and make it easier for employees to learn and practice good habits of cultural competence. This sort of policy will benefit corporations in recruitment and retention, as well as in general good will and community contribution.

- a) Employers should encourage and require employees to improve their cultural competence awareness and activism. They should allow employee absences and provide funds for education (Institutes for Healing Racism, e.g.).
- b) Employers should promote and support efforts to develop inclusive study or social groups.
- c) Employers should continue and expand their sponsorship of educational programs.
- d) Business leaders should act as mentors to others, in order to set the example of supporting attendance at educational programs.
- e) Businesses should be aware of, support, and articulate the business case for cultural competence.
- f) In order to maximize recruitment and retention, and minimize counterproductive turnover, businesses must be intentional about diversifying their workforces and supporting community efforts toward cultural competence.
- g) Employers should provide employee education to internalize the concept of cultural competence and to promote harmony and positive working conditions.
- h) Businesses should ensure that their marketing strategies and their product and service lines represent and appeal to a diverse audience and do not neglect any group in the community.
- i) Communications and training programs on development of Supplier Diversity programs should be created and implemented at businesses throughout the region.

3. Responsibilities of Units of Government

Working together facilitates connections, helps to fertilize ideas, and optimizes good results. We can continue to learn a lot from our neighbors, neighboring cities, counties and states across the country and around the world. Government groups should be intentional about this and reach out to similar organizations, as models and as collaborators.

- a) Units of government should collaborate with other communities and facilitate connections between groups within their own borders, as well as beyond. Connections should be made within a city, between cities, among ethnic groups, and beyond Michigan, to other states and countries. The goal should be increased awareness, maximization of participation and results, and coordination of efforts. An example of this type of collaborative learning relationship is the Sister City program.
- b) Elected officials and government employees should attend awareness and sensitivity training (e.g., Institutes for Healing Racism, Ruby Payne poverty training).
- c) Units of government should monitor and participate in web-based interest-group communities that are addressing these issues (e.g., Partners for a Racism-Free Community, www.prfc-gr.org).
- d) Units of government should develop Best Practices, to communicate to the public and share with other entities.
- e) Units of government should take a leadership role in the effort to develop and publicize West Michigan as a model of cultural competence, for the state and for the country.

4. Responsibilities of Individuals

Individuals have the responsibility to educate themselves and to keep their minds open to continual learning. Parents have the responsibility to educate their children, to see that the education that they provide is of good quality, and to teach children to think critically for themselves. Individuals also have an obligation to contribute to the community that nurtured them and to contribute to its continuous improvement.

- a) Individuals should investigate opportunities to learn about the goals of a community. For instance, individuals should seek out, research and read the statements of belief of the local Chamber of Commerce, area businesses, community organizations, and the city government. Individuals should not hesitate to hold these entities to their stated goals, and insist that they practice what they are advocating.

- b) Individuals should join organizations, enroll in education programs (e.g., Institutes for Healing Racism), and read to increase their knowledge of history, current conditions, and efforts toward improvement.
- c) Individuals should join, support or start advocacy/awareness groups that study and work to enhance cultural competence.
- d) Individuals should look for and practice ways to initiate meaningful relations with people different from themselves, modeling this behavior for their children, friends, neighbors and fellow citizens.

5. Responsibilities of the Educational Community

Education helps in awareness, teaches how to observe more thoroughly, begins to dispel fear, and teaches us about ourselves.

- a) School districts should work with regional diversity groups and diversity practitioners on curriculum development that follows Michigan educational standards.
- b) School districts should develop elementary school sensitivity/history curricula.
- c) School districts should develop home curricula for parents to teach their children diversity values.
- d) Educators should attend on-going awareness and sensitivity training (e.g., Institute for Healing Racism, other trainings on gender/disability/sexual orientation).
- e) School districts should provide support groups and diversity clubs for students (e.g., Calling All Colors, Gay-Straight Alliance (as in Grand Rapids), disabilities advocates.
- f) The educational community should strive for diversity among sports teams, academic clubs, and other extra-curricular activity groups.

6. Responsibilities of the Faith Community

The faith community can have a strong impact in this region by demonstrating social justice leadership and inclusion of diversity.

- a) The faith community should offer classes in racism or similar topics, referrals to or facilitation of diversity organizations, or speakers' series.

- b) Parishioners should be encouraged and educated in the importance of the issue and urged to participate.
- c) Faith-based organizations should publicize their efforts in newsletters and other public communications.
- d) The faith community should engage in community leadership efforts to increase cultural competence.
- e) The faith community should work to enhance partnerships and collaborations to welcome newcomers of diverse faiths, ethnicities, and cultures.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For Regional Community

Each of the focus groups shared pride, as well as frustrations and true concern, about their communities and the welcome that is given to newcomers and to those who are different. Steps that each community should take in their next efforts toward cultural competence include:

- Initiate multicultural and race-specific groups for minority and young professionals (e.g., MAP, as in Grand Rapids).
- Work with Intermediate School Districts throughout the region to ensure that public school students are being educated to be respectful and culturally competent.
- Work with businesses to incorporate effective diversity practices (EDP), as described in the Diversity Practices that Work, published by the National Urban League.
- Work to enhance and sustain a full network of Institutes for Healing Racism and other human relations/anti-racism education programs in the business community, the faith community and for residents not otherwise associated.
- Implement a system of rewards and recognition for efforts and successes to advance the cultural competence of the community.
- Communicate and publish efforts within the community and beyond.
- Focus groups believe that Chambers should be a leader in this process of becoming a welcoming and multicultural community (e.g., Leadership programs, partnerships, collaborations, providing a physical welcome center).

INFORMATION FROM INDIVIDUAL COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Grand Haven/Ferrysburg/Spring Lake

The Grand Haven area group of cities knows what diversity looks like. The focus groups were able to describe it, and they are aware that they do not have it. There was general agreement in the group that their area is more liberal than Holland and a strong sense that they do not want to be an exclusive or all-white town. Use of expressions such as “those people”, however, or “crime is a necessary component of increased diversity”, indicate the need for education and awareness development. Their stated primary issues are race, gender and sexual orientation.

Grand Rapids

Grand Rapids has done a lot of work around this issue and has, been contacted by other Chambers in Michigan to request guidance in their journeys. Despite their good efforts, Grand Rapids is still lacking traction to the satisfaction of the business community and too many, if not most, people of color. Having done a lot of research and implemented many first steps, they now need to get to the authentic work ahead of them.

Grand Rapids is seen as a “nice” community, but can be an inauthentic one. It is difficult to move into town and to find one’s place. It is particularly difficult for single people, and especially for middle-aged singles. Their primary issues are race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and how singles can live happily among families.

Holland

Some focus group participants in Holland seemed unconvinced that there is a problem. They appear at first glance to be a very homogenous community – white, Dutch, Christian. While some see it as a friendly community, others feel that it is difficult to be accepted. The conservative religious nature of the community may be perceived as less than welcoming to diversity and, therefore, may limit the increased prosperity that can come from a rich and varied population. Primary issues for Holland are race, religion and sexual orientation (which provoke great apprehension). Additionally, a growing and strong Hispanic/Latino community is to be noted in Holland. However, Holland has not, at this point, effected significant change in response to these conditions.

Muskegon

Muskegon sees itself as two cities. Muskegon and Norton Shores are completely foreign to Muskegon Heights, as the communities have very little to do with each other. Because of this, the primary issues in this area are racism and segregation.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

Expanding our Vision

We can continue to learn a lot from our neighbors, neighboring cities, counties and states across the country and around the world. West Michigan has already connected with some other areas to show the way, but we still need help ourselves.

- Connect with other Chambers
- Connect with other Institutes-type programs
- Connect with regional and national organizations
- Send representatives to conferences
- Publicize web-based communities

Further Education

It has been said by many, education needs to start early – not just in secondary school, but also in early childhood. Some lofty ideas for educating our youth:

- Work with Champions of Diversity on curriculum development that follows Michigan educational standards.
- Develop elementary school sensitivity/history curriculum
- Develop home curriculum for parents to teach their children diversity values
- Develop subsequent levels of Institutes for Healing Racism
- Form a committee to discuss and develop list of educational film, books, lectures
- Develop Citizens' Circles to discuss issues of diversity

Best Practices

- Working with other cities, Chambers, areas, regions, develop Best Practices; continually review and chart progress.
- Promote West Michigan as a model of cultural competence, for the state and for the country.

It is critical to the survival of West Michigan as a productive and profitable player in the economy of the state and the country to achieve a high level of cultural competence. The results will be more than the inevitable surge in economic indicators. These efforts will help to build the area into one that all residents will more fully enjoy. A richer, fuller community and state will be the result.

GENERAL ACTION STEPS FOR THE CHAMBER COALITION

Education

Brought up repeatedly, education is a critical need. Education helps in awareness, teaches how to observe more thoroughly, begins to dispel fear, and teaches us about ourselves. Several avenues for education exist in the West Michigan area currently. Many communities have Institutes for Healing Racism or similar classes, diversity organizations, or speakers' series, for example. These sorts of educational endeavors need to continue to be supported, promoted, and supplemented.

- Chambers should work with businesses to increase sponsorship of Institutes.
- Chambers should encourage corporations to send their employees and support attendance.
- Chambers should develop additional supplementary classes in healing racism and sensitivity training.
- Administrative staff to conduct and coordinate such classes should be increased to be adequate to the task.
- Chambers should oversee programs to welcome and connect racially and culturally diverse employees and their families to the region (e.g., MAP, as in Grand Rapids).
- Systems should be developed and put in place for mentoring minority-owned businesses.
- Chambers should champion supplier diversity programs, partnerships, and collaborations.

Promotion

Although many citizens in the West Michigan area have been through one or more educational programs relating to cultural competence, they need continued promotion to continue to expand the number of graduates of the programs, as well as to encourage people to realize that once is not enough.

- An Ambassador or Speaker force should be developed, trained and sent out to explain and offer a call to action toward the stated goals of cultural competence.
- Electronic communication tools and marketing materials should be developed.
- A letter campaign to the Editors of local press and business communications should be implemented.
- Political action advocacy and awareness groups should be created and coordinated.

Collaboration

Working together facilitates connections, helps to fertilize ideas, and optimizes good results.

- Connect within cities (e.g., institutes for Healing Racism with Partners for a Racism-Free Community – both in Grand Rapids).
- Connect between areas (e.g., IHR with Boys & Girls Club of Holland with Urban League of Muskegon).
- Connect among ethnicities (e.g., Asian Professionals Organization, with Black Professionals and Executives Organization, with MAP, with WM Hispanic Chamber).
- Develop a plan to facilitate individual connections (a mentor system, a friendship ring, citizen's circles, connecting people with common interests or on boards with common goals or around common topics).

References:

- Michigan Future Inc, 2006 report, “A New Agenda For A New Michigan”
- National Urban League 2007 report, “Diversity Practices That Work; The American Workers Speak:

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