Employee resource groups (ERGs) have been commonplace in corporate America for some time, but they’ve just recently begun popping up with more frequency on college campuses. ERGs can be an important part of an institution’s employee engagement and diversity and inclusion strategies, but they must be more than just social, feel-good groups. For an institution to realize the full benefits of ERGs, they must support the institution’s mission. And with HR in the driver’s seat mapping the way, employee resource groups at Princeton University and Georgia Institute of Technology are doing just that.

Refining and Aligning at Princeton

When Romy Riddick joined Princeton University’s human resources organization a year ago as director of diversity and inclusion, part of her job responsibilities included oversight of the institution’s eight employee resource groups. Riddick’s primary focus was to develop a meaningful partnership between human resources and the ERGs, while keeping in place the spirit of autonomy and entrepreneurialism of each group.

Princeton’s eight ERGs — centered around the Chinese community, international employees, Latino/as, LGBT individuals, African American male administrators, people of color, social professionals and South Asians — had always been employee-driven (in that groups of employees who wished to form an ERG would approach human resources for help in getting established) and mostly social in nature. And while the social function of ERGs is an important one, in that it serves to build a sense of community and create connections, particularly among populations that are not widely represented on campus, Riddick had a grander vision for these groups.

“We had been taking a more reactive than proactive approach in anticipating the needs of Princeton’s various demographic groups,” says Riddick. “And although there was a desire by our ERG leaders to do more for the institution, they just didn’t have the dedicated support in place to do so.” So she set out to change that. For the past year, Riddick has been working on a collaborative process to provide Princeton’s ERGs with structure and direction and, together with ERG leaders, develop plans to help them tie their activities to the university’s strategic goals and priorities.

Building a Foundation

The first item on Riddick’s agenda was to understand the purpose the ERGs had been serving and to build consensus on how they could and should evolve as
entities with a vital role to play in the institution’s mission. The office of institutional equity and diversity and the office of human resources, along with ERG leaders, partnered to create a governance model, recruit executive sponsors for each group, create an overall strategy, establish individual plans for each ERG, and formalize the elections of presidents and vice presidents for each group.

Working with ERG leaders, Riddick developed a strategic framework around the topic areas of engagement, recruitment and retention, professional development, community outreach, and diversity and inclusion. The ERGs then began creating their own individual plans to align with the strategic framework. “The opportunity for the groups to create their own plans fosters individuality and allows them to focus on their own particular areas of interest and need while still moving them together in support of overall institutional strategy,” says Riddick.

**Spreading the Word**

Next, Riddick set out to create awareness of the newly-refined ERGs. “Some of Princeton’s ERGs have been in existence for years, but there were members of the campus community who had no idea they existed,” says Riddick. “We needed to provide visibility for these groups.” How? “Our president has mentioned some of the ERGs in public remarks; we’ve supplied the ERG strategic framework to senior administrators so that they can share with their leadership teams what these groups are doing; we’ve incorporated ERGs into our new hire orientation and allow for people to become members as they enter Princeton; and we are featuring the ERGs on our website,” explains Riddick. “Visibility continues to be a priority for us as we work toward more fully penetrating across campus to get the word out.”

Riddick also felt it was important to recognize those who have spent considerable time and effort keeping the ERGs afloat. “Last year, for the first time, we wrote recognition letters, authored by the vice president of human resources and vice provost for institutional equity and diversity, for each ERG volunteer leader and sent them right before performance appraisal time to that individual’s supervisor and unit head,” says Riddick. “Although leadership in the ERGs is a volunteer role rather than an official job responsibility, it is a valued form of university citizenship as well as an opportunity to build new skills.” This one simple act created much goodwill. “The gesture was received extremely well by the ERG leaders, as it was an explicit acknowledgment of the work they had done in this volunteer capacity,” says Riddick. “And we were surprised to learn that some of the managers did not know and were thrilled to learn the extent of the work their employees had contributed to the groups.”

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**Moving in the Right Direction**

Results of a recent campus climate survey provided some additional wind in the sails for Princeton’s ERGs. The survey, designed to gauge levels of engagement and satisfaction across campus, showed some differences in the way different demographic groups rated their level of satisfaction with their working environment. “The results of the survey reaffirmed for us that our ERGs can indeed serve a purpose around two of our institution’s top priorities — employee engagement and diversity and inclusion,” says Riddick. “We are continuing to work on connecting more people with the ERGs and hopefully facilitate greater connections on campus.”

**On the Horizon**

For Princeton’s ERGs, the past year served as a time of reflection, strengthening of the infrastructure and trying new things. Now they’re ready to move forward. “We’ve just completed a set of bylaws, which provide direction on operation and governance, and we have employees who are newly motivated to assume leadership roles in the ERGs,” says Riddick. Plans for the coming year include setting in motion the plans of the current ERGs and exploring the possibility of creating new groups.

One of the top focus areas for Princeton’s ERGs is a deeper partnership with the university’s recruiting department. “Recruiting is mission critical for our institution,” says Riddick. “We are now systematically planning ERG involvement in recruiting efforts, which lends valuable support to our recruiters and enables us to represent to candidates the diversity of Princeton’s workforce.”

As Princeton’s ERGs continue to grow, Riddick is increasingly hearing from employees how important
the groups are to them. “Through the ERGs, people are developing professional relationships that make them feel even more connected to the university and to colleagues,” she says. “They feel like they are part of something that reaches beyond themselves and their daily work. And this has been our goal all along. In the end, it’s all about creating an engaging, inclusive, satisfying work environment for our people and providing opportunities for them to contribute in meaningful ways to Princeton’s mission, vision, values and goals.”

Blazing a Trail at Georgia Tech
Unlike Princeton’s ERGs, which began as employee-driven groups, Georgia Tech’s ERGs have been driven by human resources from the start and were designed at the outset to support several of the institution’s key goals and objectives. As director of culture, diversity and inclusion, Cheryl Cofield spearheaded the design and creation of Georgia Tech’s six ERGs — all of which are poised to launch this fall.

Doing the Research
Cofield began exploring the option of creating employee resource groups at Georgia Tech in April 2011 after conducting focus groups with a cross section of nearly 200 faculty and staff to examine nuances of the institution’s culture and establish a baseline for future diversity and inclusion programming. During the focus groups, the establishment of ERGs consistently emerged as a top recommendation. Cofield took these findings from the focus groups to Georgia Tech’s executive team, which enthusiastically greenlighted her proposal to explore the option of ERGs on campus.

After securing support from institutional leadership, Cofield assembled a team of 21 people from across campus to serve as the project’s steering committee. The team’s first order of business was to survey corporate entities to gather information about ERGs. The team sought to determine from each organization: (1) what types of ERGs they sponsor as well as the key service areas for their ERGs; (2) the level of leadership that visibly supports and/or serves as executive sponsors for ERGs; (3) methods used to evaluate the success and/or effectiveness of the groups; (4) the degree to which leaders encourage managers to support employee participation in ERGs; (5) the level of annual fiscal support provided to the groups; (6) how time is “counted” for participation in ERG activities; and (7) promising practices and potential landmines that might derail the success of ERGs.

The team also sent out surveys to 23 peer higher education institutions inquiring about ERGs on their campuses. “We were surprised to learn that very few of the universities we surveyed had these groups,” says Cofield. “We knew ERGs were uncommon in higher ed, but we had no idea we’d be trailblazing!”

Creating the Infrastructure
After taking a close look at Georgia Tech’s demographics, the steering committee decided on six ERGs — African Heritage; Hispanic/Latino; Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Ally; Introverts; Veterans; and Women. “We took care to organize the groups around a common dimension of diversity so that they could support the institution’s diversity and inclusion efforts to sustain a work environment where all employees feel valued, respected and productive,” says Cofield. “And given the dense pockets of quiet brilliance on Tech’s campus, we were particularly thrilled about launching what we believe to be the nation’s first ERG for introverts!”

Cofield and her team then set about creating a governance structure and laying out clear expectations for the groups. Georgia Tech’s ERGs are managed by the office of HR’s culture, diversity and inclusion team. Each ERG has two executive champions (senior-level leaders like the provost, vice presidents and deans) and a principal empowerment officer (individuals at the director-level and above), as well as two staff/faculty liaisons. The executive champions visibly promote ERG programs and initiatives, explore funding and resource options, and provide mentoring and development to ERG membership. The principal empowerment officer serves as the ERG’s chief operating officer and liaison between the executive champions and HR and holds the ERGs accountable for adding value and contributing to institutional goals. The staff/faculty liaisons lead the strategic planning of the ERG’s annual business plan and annual report, serve as liaisons between the principal

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empowerment officer and the general ERG membership, and coach and provide support to ERG committee chairs.

**Adding Value**

In line with Georgia Tech’s institutional priorities, the ERGs have three main focus areas — recruiting, employee engagement and professional development. "Everything they do must relate back to these three areas,” says Cofield. “We need to be able to show the institutional value of these groups, or they can get shut down pretty quickly. The fact of the matter is, the administration is not going to fund social groups.” And human resources is committed to helping the ERGs succeed. “We will work with our ERGs to ensure they stay on track,” says Cofield. “We’ll equip them with the tools, knowledge and resources they need to be able to contribute to the institution in a meaningful way.” In fact, human resources is working on compiling a catalogue of presentations, workshops and other professional and personal development opportunities that the ERGs can pull from to create programming.

To ensure Georgia Tech’s ERGs are aligned with the goals of the institution, each group is charged with developing an annual business plan — goals, objectives, desired outcomes and tactics for meeting those goals. These business plans will be shared with HR leadership and each group will be held accountable for adhering to its plan. Cofield also hopes to get representatives from each ERG in front of Georgia Tech’s executive team annually to report out on what they’re doing. “The administration needs to be able to see how these groups are contributing to the success of the institution.”

And how exactly does Cofield see the ERGs contributing to the greater good? “We believe the ERGs will add value in many ways,” she says. “ERG members can serve as role models and mentors to new hires. The ERGs will also work with our talent acquisition team to attract diverse candidates. Having these groups available may help prospective employees and new hires feel more at ease if they are members of underrepresented groups. ERG participants can serve as built-in focus groups for new programs and services. They can help promote an inclusive workplace and help us uncover issues that are specific to the needs of diverse communities. And they will most certainly help to promote and facilitate engagement, networking, collaboration and professional development.”

**Strong Out of the Gate**

Although Georgia Tech’s ERGs are just out of the gate, they’re already making strides. They have significant leadership support anchoring the plans for the kick-off this fall. Likewise, appointments to the core leadership team were strategic moves to facilitate a successful launch. “The buzz around these groups is absolutely incredible,” says Cofield. “People are more excited than we’d even imagined.”

**Recipe for Success**

“I know it’s early in the game, but I’m hopeful that we can be a success story and an example of how to do employee resource groups right in a higher education setting,” says Cofield. Her strongest piece of advice for institutions considering starting ERGs on campus? “Be sure to create a sound governance model and accountability structure; make sure you have strong, visible support from institutional leadership; and take care to align the work of the ERGs with institutional goals and objectives.”

We’re working on compiling some resources related to employee resource groups on college campuses for inclusion in the CUPA-HR Knowledge Center. Does your institution have ERGs? To which populations do they cater? Is HR a key player in creating or supporting these groups? Do you have sample operating procedures or frameworks for your ERGs? Give us the scoop by sending an e-mail to communications@cupahr.org.

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Attend the concurrent session “Ready, Set, Engage! Improving Engagement Through Employee Resource Groups” at the CUPA-HR Annual Conference and Expo 2013 in Las Vegas this fall to learn more about ERGs in higher education. Visit www.cupahr.org/conference2013.