



Minority Enterprise Advocate

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Michael Hester Takes UNCF Special Programs (UNCFSP) Corporation to a New Level

By Dianne Hayes

Located on the sixth floor of a high-rise building in Falls Church, Va., Michael J. Hester is working to integrate old business models with new opportunities for minority institutions and the federal government through UNCF Special Programs (UNCFSP) Corporation.

While most people are familiar with UNCF's slogan "A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste" and its successful scholarship programs for private Historically Black Colleges and Universities, not as many are aware of the outstanding work being performed by the UNCF Special Programs (UNCFSP) Corporation.

UNCFSP operates as a separate and independent 501(c) 3 non-profit organization with its own board of directors. Hester is at the helm, serving as UNCFSP interim President & CEO, after serving as Vice President & COO since 2004.

A seasoned visionary leader, Hester's goal for UNCFSP is to provide the minority education community with the tools and mechanisms to identify, qualify, and capture opportunities in the Federal marketplace. Through these opportunities and with strategic partnerships with private industry, he hopes to create the teams of minority institutions and small and large businesses that provide cutting-edge solutions and research to solve our nation's most pressing concerns.

Hester's new priorities for UNCFSP were developed with an understanding that old strategies needed to be adapted to the new fiscal realities of cuts to federal spending and the challenges that so many non-profits face in today's economy. His strategy was to better position UNCFSP's strengths with the nation's demands – areas related to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) and by enhancing the connection between minority institutions, corporations and the federal government.

"Our focus is mostly geared toward turning relationships with potential federal customers into opportunities for the minority education community," said Hester, who has a staff that is prepared to identify and support contract opportunities. "Our distinguishing feature is that we are a non-profit federal contractor, working to engage the technical talent of the minority education community in the federal marketplace."

“Minority institutions, particularly Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), unfortunately have a disproportionate share of federal opportunities awarded to institutions of higher education. HBCUs receive only about 1.4 percent of federal research & development (R&D) dollars and only about 3.5 percent of non-R&D dollars. Our role is to change those numbers for the better.”

Hester said UNCFSP is currently putting together a consortium of 44 institutions, with minority institutions as the group’s foundation, along with small companies in good standing with the federal government. The consortium will offer training on responding to RFPs and doing business with the federal government, as well as putting together strong teams to pursue contracts.” “We are talking to a number of federal agencies because of the consortium,” he said.

Hester is an analytical business strategist with over 18 years of experience in managing large-scale programs for nonprofits and educational institutions. In addition to having expertise in strategic change management and organizational processes, Hester has additionally demonstrated expertise in connecting minority institutions of higher education to contracting opportunities in the federal marketplace.

In the early phase of his career, Hester gained invaluable experience in all facets of education administration ranging from K-12, community college, four-year institution and STEM educational policy at the federal level. He has held a number of administrative positions in higher education from Special Assistant to the Vice President of Academic Affairs and Assessment Coordinator at Saint Augustine’s College; Program Evaluator for the Wake County Public School System in Raleigh, NC; and Director of Institutional Research and Planning for Guilford Technical Community College in Greensboro, NC.

Hester continued his work in minority education grants and contracts administration during his tenure with NASA Headquarters in Washington, DC. While there, he managed multiple projects valued at over \$12 million for the NASA Minority University Research and Education Division and supervised a 37-member team of analysts.

His expertise has heightened the role UNCFSP plays in identifying, qualifying, and capturing government opportunities. Through these opportunities and with strategic partnerships, Minority Institutions can produce cutting edge concepts and develop research to solve vital national issues.

UNCFSP has extensive experience in promoting and managing collaborative efforts between government and Minority Institutions in the areas of workforce development, capacity building, and global affairs. UNCFSP was created to connect the diverse, high performing workforce of the minority education community with private industry to address critical needs, demands and shortages in the U.S. in areas such as research and development, defense, health care, national security, and education: UNCFSP’s mission is to organize and deliver educational support services such as capacity building, technical assistance and workforce development programs to Minority Institutions of higher education. Federal agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, National Library of Medicine, Corporation for National and Community Service, U.S. Agency for International Development, and U.S. Departments of Education, Defense, Energy, and Justice and Interior have funded programs that have reached constituents both nationally and internationally.

These programs address education and research infrastructure; public and community health; international affairs and development; civic engagement and community service; policy analysis; and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics competency.

UNCFSP was established April 1, 2000, with the broad mandate of supporting all Minority Serving Institutions, domestically and internationally. The goal is simple – full participation in the nations' education and research agenda.

As the global competition heightens, our nation needs a robust, skilled, diverse, human capital pool to maintain and advance the world's most productive economy. UNCFSP has responded to the call by developing and administering programs that address the needs of all stakeholders: institutions, faculty and students.

Under Hester's lead, UNCFSP provides an invaluable service by acting as a single point of access to the minority education community with an expansive network of more than 300 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and Other Minority Institutions (OMIs).

UNCFSP helps in numerous ways beyond training and technical assistance, but also infrastructure and curriculum development enhance degree programs and strengthen the institutions. It is also involved in leadership-building programs in the form of fellowships, internships, and other professional development activities for students and faculty to increase skill sets and expertise.

UNCFSP has built an extensive partnership network of federal agencies, international governments, nongovernmental organizations, community based and faith-based organizations, professional organizations, and private industry. UNCFSP helps Minority Serving Institutions compete for federal grants and contracts by using its partnership network to build consortia, advocate for the inclusion of its institutions in grants and contracting opportunities, and establish mutually beneficial partnerships.

"There is incredible talent in this untapped market of minority institutions," Hester said. "It is in all of our best interest to connect this talent with the challenges that face us all."