

An Interview with Ernest Betts

By Sarah Singer

Executive Briefing: This is an interview with Dr. Ernie Betts. Dr. Betts is the Assistant Dean for Multicultural Business Programs in the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University. Dr. Betts has over three decades of experience counseling multicultural and low-income students. He has established consultancy relationships with Fortune 500 corporations that have resulted in dynamic corporate financial partnerships such as The Summer Business Institute and the Broad Business Student Camp.

Dean Betts is a specialist in the areas of diversity both domestic and international, placement, recruitment and retention who remains committed to students and their development through higher education and professional life.



Sarah Singer: You have 33 years' experience as an administrator and faculty member at Michigan State University. What do you consider the best part of working for MSU?

Ernest Betts: Working with students, absolutely the best part of my job. Helping students develop career perspectives and embracing their passion along with career opportunities is crucial to their success.

Correlating to that, of course, is helping them develop their academic skills to really allow them to succeed academically while exposing them to world cultures and events. All of that is what creates my excitement every day. This is my passion; I'd do this job for free. To all of that, I would add working with companies and helping them understand today's students, the skillsets they have, and how to recruit them is also very rewarding, and of course my staff. I have a great staff. We're only four people, but we are able to accomplish some incredible things.

Singer: You are an expert and specialist in the areas of diversity, placement, recruitment, and retention. Can you speak about the trends you've seen in these areas? How do you expect these areas to evolve over the next several years?

Betts: From a diversity perspective, people from all walks of life are being more respected and embraced. And this is not just people of color and women, but also those with physical disabilities and the LGBT community. We're really seeing an influx of Asians, and here I mean Asian Americans who are really changing culturally on the views of women. We see many more Asian American women going to college and universities now, whereas in the past that might not have been an option. We're certainly seeing more Hispanics, as well. This is important because currently the largest population of

people of color in the private sector is Hispanics. We're seeing increasing presence of and contributions from Native Americans. Look at a couple businesses that are Native American owned: Rush Trucking in Wayne, MI and Hard Rock Café, in Orlando, FL. Hard Rock is owned by the Seminole Tribe, a fact which many people don't know. The Native American population and community is really utilizing its wealth and becoming more prominent in the business world.

I see diversity growing because of the need for diversity from a global perspective. For example, from the market perspective, there is a need to penetrate markets that are very diverse. And the role of women is really, really important. The glass ceiling is not broken yet, but it has a lot of cracks in it now. I see gender being less of an issue with regards to competence and leadership especially. Women have the ability to strategically manage their lives better than men can! Women are still expected to handle the children, the household chores, all of these things, but they have the uncanny ability to do all society expects of them and still be professionals. Men aren't even close.

As for retention, it's really correlated to working with students very early, to saying "your high school may have had smart people, but now that you're here, you're competing with the smartest people from around the world." We have to work on study skills, test taking, advising, and making sure students are choosing class schedules that make sense for them.

It all comes together with placement and working with companies to identify the top students early on. For example, with our Summer Business Institute, which is 22 years old, the biggest issue is telling companies they can't be a part of it. They want to identify the top incoming freshmen. But we also have companies now that have recruited students from the program without an

interview, based entirely on our recommendation. Obviously, that's directly related to the partnerships we've been able to establish.

Singer: How have the mission and goals of the Multicultural Business Program changed in the time since you created it?

Betts: When I walked in the door, my mission was to enhance minority representation in the College. My personal mission and vision was to create a program that was inclusive of all students regardless of socioeconomic status or race or anything else. Around 1992, I petitioned to change the name of the program from the Minority Education Program to the Multicultural Business Program to be more inclusive. The truth is a lot of people, especially Caucasians, think "multicultural" is still a minority program, probably due to a lack of exposure to what multicultural really is and means. With the name change, we definitely saw an immediate increase in the diversity of our students. We had one program, the Broad Business Student Camp that existed for roughly 7 years, and roughly 80% of the students were Caucasian. That program created leaders for a multitude of student groups in the College and really facilitated awareness among the student body that at the end of the day, there are more similarities among students than differences.

In our tutorial program, 38% of the students tutored are Caucasians, and every culture is represented among our tutors. We have 140 students in our Women in Business association, and 80% are Caucasian. Students, all students, are really looking for people who believe in them and we offer that. Corporations come in and see a unit providing so many opportunities where students have a chance to interact with so many others and they see the ingredients for future managers – people who will have no problem leading or being led by a person of a different race or gender.

Singer: What do you consider some of the hallmark successes of the Multicultural Business Program?

Betts: The graduation rate of our students. The fact that we have a very strong graduation rate, especially students who attend the Summer Business Institute [their graduation rate is 73%, is impressive. Many students who have taken part in the Multicultural Business Program are in very influential roles in Fortune 100 companies today. One young man is the Vice President for Human Relations at a Fortune 100 company and there are many, many students who are doing extremely well, extremely well.

Being an advocate and catalyst for graduate program enrollment is also a great success. From 1989 to 2006-07, over 80% of the students of color in MSU's MBA program came from MBP.

We've also had a number of PhD candidates over the years that came through the program, and that's just MSU. We've also sent many, many students on to other great schools like University of Michigan, Ohio State, Notre Dame, Indiana, and Purdue.

Of course, when top Fortune 100s and top universities come to you and request a workshop on how to create a program at their university or at the primary universities where they recruit, any time that happens, that's a heck of an acknowledgement of your program.

Singer: The Multicultural Business Program spring 2011 newsletter made a point of reminding all Broad College students that all of the organizations affiliated with the MBP are open to all business majors. As international student enrollment has grown, to what extent have you seen an increase in international students becoming involved with the MBP?

Betts: We've seen a huge increase in international student involvement. For example, the National Association of Black Accountants: last year's president was East Indian, the External Vice President was Pakistani, and the Treasurer was Chinese. The Native American Hispanic Business Society: for the last two years the president has been a Korean, and last year the secretary was Serbian. The External VP for the Multicultural Business Program is a Chinese student. Think what an opening that is from a recruiting perspective: how you learned about the organization, how you became involved, the viewpoints and perspectives you bring to the organization. It's huge.

Something people have forgotten is a sense of place. If an international student comes in and doesn't see a sense of place for them, they look around for one. It only takes a few involved students to then show the others. We have a philosophy that we are family. We take that very seriously. The international students come in, they meet with staff, they spend time talking to us. Every year, no matter where I go, international students go on my study abroad programs. They take these experiences back to their peer groups and it just intensifies the numbers. You see it literally in the student groups I mentioned, the number of international students who walk in and try to compete for executive board positions. It's just part of what we do. We don't see them as international students; we see them as students at MSU, and we make a place for them like we do for all other students.

Singer: You have developed and facilitated study abroad programs to Monterrey, Mexico; Taipei, Taiwan; Cuba; and Cape Town, South Africa. How would you describe

the relationship between multiculturalism and globalization?

Betts: I would describe it as an outstanding opportunity for domestic students who represent minority groups to understand their value, the desire of multinational corporations to hire them because of the need for employees who understand different cultures. The value that executives have for our students enhances their perspective in terms of opportunities for them in global business. We talk about globalization, but when we go and see the U.S. companies in Mexico, or South Africa, and we visit them, it enhances the students' understanding of these companies overseas and it enhances their overall understanding of business. It all goes back to exposure, allowing them to really see the different in assembly lines or unionization, different business practices. If you travel and have an entrepreneurial drive, you learn about opportunities you never would have thought existed. At the end of the day, that's really global entrepreneurial spirit.

I was meeting with an East Indian student the other day, talking about her passions and the ability to pursue what she loves and turn it into a career. As we talked, her eyes lit up; I could see the wheels turning as she considered what was possible. That's what it's about; we have got to get students thinking on a global perspective and not just have an assembly line education.

Singer: During your career you've also had the opportunity to serve as an adjunct professor on the faculty of Monterrey Tec in Monterrey, Mexico. How have your experiences as an adjunct professor at that institution informed your work with the Multicultural Business Program?

Betts: The best way, I feel, to understand others is to interject yourself into their culture. It allows me to bring back to my students so much that I learn from them, and they teach me a lot. Teaching in Monterrey enhances my network and I'm able to create strong trust and friendship, which I can also come back to MSU and teach to our students. Beyond that, maybe I can utilize that trust to get faculty from there to come to MSU and teach our students about topics to understand the Mexican market: the importance of time, how to do business there, the importance of relationships and trust.

I really value the relationships I've established with the student body in Mexico. I've been in an airport, on a city street and been recognized by a former student, "Hey, aren't you Dr. Betts?" That's a reinforcing factor for me that (1) I did a good job and (2) it was important, valued information I shared with them. At Monterrey Tec, it's an expensive, private school and it really focuses on academics, not skills for job seeking, so that's something I can bring to them.

The relationship with Monterrey Tec directly brought in five students to MSU's MBA program. That directly enhances the international student body from our third largest trading partner. Just thinking about it is fun.

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