

# U of M shows commitment to supplier diversity

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## *Suppliers of color are the country's fastest growing business sector*

The University of Minnesota's Office for Business and Community Economic Development (OBCED), since its inception in 1999, has demonstrated steady growth in using Black-owned vendors, women-owned vendors, and vendors owned by other people of color. Its Supplier Diversity Program was honored earlier this year by the North Central Minority Supplier Development Council as 2017 Corporation of the Year for supplier diversity.

The Women's Business National Enterprise Council-Minnesota, in March, also named the department this year's Corporate Partner of the Year.

OBCED Executive Director Darryl Peal told the *MSR* that suppliers of color are the country's fastest growing business sector. As a result, he said, the U of M has made a concerted effort to contract with more local vendors of color.

"It started with the president," Peal noted in reference to University President Eric Kaler's emphasis on the school's role in the economic development of diverse businesses. "He wrote a magnificent letter last year to the campus community on having a diverse supply chain," continued Peal. "He [Kaler] encouraged all the chancellors, directors and deans to get on board. It was strong and powerful, a clear message... It is not a suggested thing."

Peal proudly stressed the following points:

- Over \$22 million was spent with "targeted vendors" in the last 24 months.
- Over \$71.3 million was spent with Women, Minorities and Disabled Suppliers (WMDBEs) in fiscal year 2015-16, an \$11.5 million increase over the previous fiscal year 2014-15.
- Over \$82 million was spent with WMDBEs in fiscal year 2016-17, a three percent increase.
- The university spent 31 percent of its construction dollars with targeted vendors.

"It is a good business strategy" for the school, Peal told the gathering at his office's October 3 Construction Expo and Goods and Services Matchmaker event at St. Paul's RiverCentre. It was an all-day event where local Black-owned businesses and businesses owned by women and other people of color connected with the university, as well as

large corporations and government agencies, in short interview sessions scheduled at the site.

The *MSR* talked to three local Black business owners who were among the nearly 100 companies that participated in the event.

At the university, said Rick Harris, CEO of Ideal Commercial Interiors, “Over the last couple of years, Ideal Commercial Interiors has been a part of close to a million dollars’ worth of work.” This came about when he met with the school’s purchasing manager in 2015, a meeting that Peal arranged, Harris recalls.

“Darryl was very open in how he could help. I told him my story, that I couldn’t get any sales at the university. He brokered a meeting with me and purchasing,” Harris said about his firm, which was hired by the school to install furniture, carpeting and other equipment in a couple of campus buildings.

Mark Harris (no relation to Rick Harris) has an office supply firm, Abundant Office Solutions, and says he has connected with large vendors that usually work with the school, largely due to Peal. “I told him my mission and vision,” he recalls. He and Peal had subsequent meetings where they discussed how Harris could tweak his website and change the name of his company in ways that would better reflect his products and services and improve his catalog.

“I took his advice,” Mark said. He calls Peal “a champion.”

“You need somebody willing to give you a chance, to be your advocate. He is one of the few people who actually open their doors, that do follow up and reach out,” Mark reiterated.

Jon Rich hoped the October matchmaking event would boost his construction business by connecting with the university. Rich said, “We want to get our feet in the door. We want to do more work on the campus.”

He started his Action Construction Services in 2011. “We do it all on the residential side. We do light commercial, masonry and concrete.”

“It’s not just me,” Peal said as he deflected the aforementioned praise from the two Harrises. “We have to hire more MBEs, WBEs. It’s important that they learn how to grow finance and do marketing, improve their website, to have a catalog of supply and a way to distribute them in a fast way.”

“If we have the opportunity, we can do it,” said Ideal Commercial Interiors’ Rick Harris. “It’s not working fast enough, but we got to thank God for small steps. As we get in and get contracts, and do good work...we can do the work if we are given the opportunity.”