

# CRAIN'S Cleveland Business

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## Program fosters diversity along supply chain

By RICHARD WEINER



Photo by Shane Wynn for Crain's Participants of Kent State University's and Turner Construction's workshop for minority business owners attend a May 9 graduation ceremony at the university. (Shane Wynn for Crain's)

Veronica Cook-Euell is leading a mission at **Kent State University** and coming up with some unique programs as a result. Cook-Euell, KSU'S supplier diversity program manager, is the first administrator to hold a position specifically designed to recruit minority-owned businesses to supply the university and one of the first in the state, said Timothy J. Konczal, director of KSU's procurement department.

"We take supplier diversity very seriously," Konczal said. "She's always out searching for minority partners to try to nurture so that they can become a viable supplier for us — almost like creating a business incubator. Her mission, and her long-term goal, is simply to improve the business climate here."

An outgrowth of Cook-Euell's undertaking is a unique public-private partnership designed to teach minority business owners in the construction trades how to bid for contracts at KSU. The result is a nine-week workshop, co-sponsored by the university and **Turner Construction Co.**, that just graduated its first class of 14 participants on May 9.

The path to the new workshop starts with a proprietary minority business database Cook-Euell developed at the university. While any company can bid on university projects, KSU is always looking to expand its use of minority suppliers.

Now in its second stage of growth, the database lists about 1,200 minority suppliers and is available to any end-user at the university. The database lists each company's skills, certifications, past projects, services offered, key clients and a narrative.

To qualify as a minority-owned business under Ohio law, more than 51% of ownership must be African-American, Asian, Hispanic, or woman-owned. The university also includes veterans in the bidding process, Cook-Euell said.

In looking at ways to expand the opportunities for companies in her database, Cook-Euell approached Turner Construction because of a longtime program the company already was offering.

Turner Construction has been offering its Turner School of Management since 1969, said Jason Jones, vice president and general manager for Turner's Northeast Ohio office. The annual 12-week workshop at the Cuyahoga Community College Metro Campus is specifically designed to increase opportunities for minority- and women-owned construction businesses.

"I knew that Turner had been doing their supply management program for years, and I reached out to them," said Cook-Euell, to see if they could create a three-way partnership with the university as the host and educational component, the state of Ohio as the purchaser, and Turner as both a private contractor and a veteran of this kind of training program.

Kent State came to the table with Cook-Euell's office, the Office of the University Architect, and the College of Applied Engineering, Sustainability, and Technology, along with the university's educational facilities.

"We had one meeting with Veronica and we were sold on the project," Jones said.

"We have been working with Kent State for the last three years," he said, and particularly with the state's EDGE (Encouraging Diversity, Growth and Equity) guidelines, which recommend at least a 15% minority stake in any state-financed project.

Indeed, any tour of Kent in the past few years would have run into Turner Construction signs attached to any number of projects on campus.

The minority training program originated in Turner's Cleveland office and has spread to many of the company's other locations, Jones said. The classes "try to teach all aspects of the construction industry" to potential minority subcontractors, including sales, marketing, bidding, scheduling, site logistics, insurance, quality control and anything else that can give an edge in this highly competitive field, he said.

Following that first meeting, Jones, Cook-Euell and their teams went to work melding Turner's knowledge base with the needs of the university. The result, Cook-Euell said, was a program that wound up being about 60% Turner materials and 40% original KSU materials.

The KSU class materials included presentations and discussion on topics such as LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) systems and lean construction, scheduling, field operations, estimating and bidding, project delivery systems and contract risk, accounting, insurance and marketing, and a special discussion on working with state universities and institutions.

Beyond in-class training, both Cook-Euell and Jones note, the networking opportunities for class participants are ample, both with end-users and one another.

One class participant, Teresa Golden, owner of Canton's Environmental Flooring Group LLC, is effusive in her praise for the program.

"I learned so much about how to develop and grow my company," she said. "They covered so many topics. This has been a great opportunity, because I've met many small business owners like myself."

This first class was considered to be a pilot effort, Cook-Euell said, but has been successful enough that another class is scheduled for the fall.

And, while nothing has been approved yet, Cook-Euell hopes construction is just the start. She's said she's working on other programs for other businesses.

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