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OPINION

How one Portland credit union bolstered its DEI programs

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The events of the last year highlighted that we continue to struggle with social justice and equality for communities of color.

The pandemic has also taken a higher economic toll on these communities. The chairman of the National Credit Union Association, Rodney E. Hood, recently called financial inclusion the civil rights issue of our time. He's right, and Advantis Credit Union, like many other credit unions, is taking this to heart.

As a cooperative movement based on the mission of "people helping people," we believe that this should be part of what we do as a financial service provider, an employer, and a member of our community. We know that the diversity, equity and inclusion journey will need to be strategic and intentional in order to make a meaningful difference that sustains.

As a white male leading these efforts, I acknowledge that I have a lot to learn and challenge myself and others to listen, learn and be a positive force for making an impact.



LEIF SJOQUIST/COURTESY OF ADVANTIS
Advantis Credit Union Woodstock Branch Manager Ebony Umbekei (left) is part of a committee partnering with Bank on Oregon. The participants hope to develop a checking product that will be Bank On certified, "a money-saving alternative to using check cashing companies or money orders."

On the national level, the credit union industry has taken a bold stance against racial injustice. In June, Jim Nussle, the president/CEO of the Credit Union National Association, called for a unified voice against systemic racism and committed CUNA to being a catalyst for change and a leader in creating financial inclusion.

Locally, the president of the Northwest Credit Union Association, Troy Stang, called on credit unions in Oregon, Washington and Idaho to take actions toward doing more for financially underrepresented communities, and has created a DEI task force comprised of credit unions from across our region.

As an industry and employer, this is the right time to take a close look at how we can set better standards as an organization, and to take action in closing the inequality gap. This means supporting ownership and educating oneself, and providing our teams with resources to learn.

For instance, Advantis has sponsored the Filene Research Institute's Center of Excellence for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, a project that is conducting and applying research on diversity, equity, and inclusion in credit unions as a model for the larger financial services sector.

Additionally, Advantis has joined with other credit unions across the country in signing a pledge with the CU DEI Collective to commit to change. We are now working to build a diversity, equity and inclusion council made up of employees representing various leadership levels who are empowered to help develop, support and enrich Advantis' DEI initiatives.

In this vein, we're also creating affinity groups that will bring employees with similar, and very different, life experiences together to advocate for specific needs in our workplace — building awareness beyond our own experiences and biases.

We are continuing to examine and improve our recruiting and hiring process, seeking ways to attract a more diverse workforce at all levels of our organization. We're taking deliberate steps to connect with communities of color by partnering with local organizations like Partners In Diversity to help sponsor their work

and educational programming, and utilizing their job board and networking events to create awareness of employment opportunities.

We've tapped into the knowledge of our internal experts and joined with other local credit unions in partnering with the Urban League of Portland on a series of workshops that provide education and resources on home ownership and financial empowerment, while also providing us with an opportunity to learn directly from community members on what is needed, and the challenges they are facing.

At the state level, we're collaborating with Bank On Oregon in support of providing more Oregonians with easy access to financial products.

As a true community partner, we believe it's critical to support local nonprofits through financial resources, time and talent. We recently launched our Allies for Good community giving program that commits 1/3 of our annual giving budget to organizations serving underrepresented and marginalized communities.

Advantis kicked off the program with a \$20,000 grant to Self Enhancement Inc., a nonprofit that works with schools, families and partner organizations to support and provide opportunities to achieve personal and academic success. These grant funds are providing internet accessibility for 66 households throughout the metro area, making it easier for students to attend and participate in online classes and other learning activities.

Moving forward, Allies for Good will provide ongoing financial support and volunteer service to local nonprofits, and has resonated with our employees as a strong first step in our DEI journey. We chose the name Allies for Good because it represents our goal of Advantis being an ally to organizations that support underrepresented communities, and for our employees to serve as allies for marginalized groups.

Externally, it includes our members who are passionate about DEI since, as part of our co-op, they are also serving as allies by being a member-owner of our organization.

These efforts are just some of the elements that make up our DEI strategy. We still have a lot of listening and learning to do from our employees, our members, and our nonprofit partners. Our hope is this momentum builds as an industry to create positive change. It's not just good business, but most importantly, it's the right thing to do.