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Leadership program is filling a wide gap

By *David Nicklaus*

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The St. Louis area has dozens of business training programs, and even more networking groups. Still, the first participants in something called

the Initiative Fellows Program insist that it fills

a huge gap.

"I wish we had had this 20 years ago," said Brian Leonard, a 49-year-old assistant manager at AmerenUE. "Some of the things we're getting in this program, it takes years to get on your own."

What Leonard and his peers are getting is a year's worth of leadership training, personal development and community service, most of it crammed into daylong meetings once a month.

They're also building what organizers hope will be a lifelong network of people like themselves: All 21 Initiative Fellows have been identified by their bosses as high-potential managers, and all are people of color.

The program is a creation of the St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative and got its startup funding from Civic Progress, the group representing most of St. Louis' biggest companies. The business case is simple: If St. Louis isn't an attractive career destination for members of minority groups, Civic Progress companies miss out on a huge — and increasingly important — pool of talent. What's more, they risk losing key employees to places like Atlanta, with its reputation as a land of opportunity for African-Americans.

The Initiative Fellows program is patterned after a 20-year-old Boston effort known simply as the Partnership. It has trained 1,600 people since 1987, and more than 80 percent have stayed in Boston. In surveys, three-quarters say they stayed because of connections they made through the Partnership.

Valerie Patton, executive director of the Diversity Initiative, wants the program to achieve similar longevity, and similar numbers, in St. Louis. "That really is the question, how do we keep these people within our region?" she said. "You have to grow personally and professionally. And you get a chance to build a network of other people who look like you. That's the MasterCard commercial piece: It's priceless."

Patton, a longtime executive in St. Louis for SBC Communications (now AT&T) and NationsBank (now Bank of America), said that early in her career, "I didn't see a lot of people who looked like me." She stayed, but she knows that many other young professionals leave because "they don't see the social piece. And for a lot of people outside the region, they don't see the potential here."

The Fellows program began last September, so the first class isn't even halfway through. But Shloe Wilson Jeffery, who moved here two years ago for a job in Monsanto's human resources department, says it's already made her more appreciative of her new hometown. "It's given me a good perspective on St.

Louis and all it has to offer," she said during a training session last week at Brown Shoe in Clayton.

A year's worth of training probably won't be enough to keep these high-potential professionals in St. Louis. But a lifelong network just might be. "One thing we're seeing is that we all face the same challenges," said Demetrius Grooms, a department leader at Edward Jones. "We sometimes think we're trapped in a vacuum and these things are only happening to us. Getting everybody's input on how they faced these challenges has been very beneficial."

In a colorblind world, a program like this might not be necessary. In real-world St. Louis, this pioneering class of 21 represents an important step forward.

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