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EQUALITY RIDE
33 young queers on a bus, changing America one campus at a time

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Corporate doors open wide

As large corporations realize the benefits of a diverse workforce, career-minded gays and lesbians are being recruited like never before

By Dan Allen
like many MBA students entering an elite business school, Kevin Smith, 28, knew he'd be courted during his first year by recruiters from some of America's top corporations. What he didn't plan on was how much his being gay would factor into the recruitment process—in a good way.

America's big corporations have discovered that employee diversity can boost their bottom lines, and Smith's generation of LGBT power players has become the target of corporate recruiters who are employing a variety of innovative methods to reach out to them. A student at New York University's Stern School of Business, Smith attended the Reaching Out MBA conference in Chicago last year, where he met with and was eventually recruited by American Express to be an intern this summer. The annual student-run event brings gay and lesbian corporate job seekers together with recruiters from some of the nation's largest companies, including Home Depot, Target, General Electric, and Toyota.

"Workplace diversity is something that American Express has always stood behind," says Smith. "They see their corporate culture as being a reflection on the diversity of both New York—being a New York–headquartered company—and more importantly, on the nation as a whole."

Linda Hassan, director of diversity recruiting for American Express, says her company understands the role people like Smith can play. "We are a global company, with global customers served by employees of various races, nationalities, and experiences," she says. "To be successful in the marketplace, it's important that our workforce reflects our customer base."

The gay community has a lot to offer the nation's top employers, says Dan Honig, chief operating officer of WorkplaceDiversity.com, a job-search Web site dedicated to helping recruiters broaden the spectrum of their employee bases. "Facts are facts, and with the gay and lesbian community, education levels are simply higher than average," he says. "There are so many wonderful opportunities for companies to have top talent and a diversity of thought that doesn't currently exist in their companies."

Ed Bullock, vice president of diversity for L'Oréal USA, which had a booth at the Reaching Out conference, is counting on it. "Diverse organizations are more innovative and creative, and a key cornerstone of a diverse business is creating a diverse workforce," he says. "Diversity is a key business strategy for L'Oréal, because we believe it has a direct impact on the bottom line."

So moved was Smith by the importance and value of the Reaching Out conference that he's now helping to organize this year's three-day event, which will bring together more than 30 companies and 600 candidates this fall in New York. "As a marketing person, I've always been a firm believer that companies who are trying to sell their services and sell their products need to reach out to an even more diversified nation," says Smith. "You know, the United States isn't the Wonder-bread suburbs of the 1940s and '50s that it once was in popular imagination. More and more, companies are realizing that they need to have a tacit understanding of what's going on in the population as a whole—not only to compete but to be good citizens for their customers."