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Survey: More Minorities at Big Firms in Texas

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Roland Garcia was a young lawyer in Houston nearly two decades ago when he heard that Cesar Alvarez, who is Hispanic, had just been tapped chief executive officer of Greenberg Traurig, a large Miami-based firm.

Garcia, who would later become the first minority elected as president of the Houston Bar Association, was impressed that Greenberg Traurig had selected a minority as its leader in 1997 and he sent a congratulatory letter to Alvarez.

Garcia said he had forgotten all about that letter by 2005 when Greenberg Traurig approached him about opening an office in Houston. During an interview with Alvarez and firm leaders, Garcia said, it dawned on him that he had contacted Alvarez before, and his recognition of the firm's longtime support for diversity helped convince him that the firm was a natural fit for him.

"I immediately fell in love with the culture of the firm," said Garcia, a shareholder in Greenberg Traurig's Houston office.

A decade after opening an office in Houston, 20.5 percent of Greenberg Traurig's lawyers in its Texas offices as of July 1 are minorities, the highest percentage among the firms that participated in Texas Lawyer's 2015 Women and Minorities Survey. The



ROLAND GARCIA, SHAREHOLDER, GREENBERG TRAUIG IN HOUSTON

25 largest firms in Texas, as listed on Texas Lawyer's "The Texas 100" poster published April 28, were invited to participate in the survey, and 20 did. [See chart this page]

For Greenberg Traurig, that 20.5 percent compares to 22.7 percent a year before; the firm has 18.3 percent minority partners and equity partners in Texas, compared to 19 percent the previous year. Those percentages of minorities among Texas partners and equity partners are the highest percentages for minority partners in Texas among the 20 firms. The firm has offices in Houston, Dallas and Austin.

For the 20 firms that participated in the survey, as of July 1, 14.4 percent of the Texas lawyers at the 20 firms are minorities, compared to 14 percent for the same firms as of July 1, 2014. The numbers for partners improved as well: As of July 1, 9.3 percent of partners in the 20 firms are minorities, compared to 9 percent the previous year, and 8.7 percent of equity partners in those firms are minorities, compared to 8 percent as of July 1, 2014.

Garcia said a diversity program as successful as Greenberg Traurig's in Texas doesn't happen by chance. He said it's a three-pronged effort comprised of recruiting, training and retaining minority lawyers. To attract minority laterals, he said the firm looks beyond law schools to identify laterals at minority bar associations, government agencies and clients.

He said success in improving diversity breeds more.

"Minorities bring value to our practice and our firm," he said.

Other firms with healthy percentages of minority lawyers in Texas are Haynes and Boone with 19.4 percent, Jones Day with 17.7 percent, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld with 17.6 percent and Vinson & Elkins with 17.3 percent.

About 17.8 percent of the 96,912 active members of the State Bar of

Texas identify themselves as racial/ethnic minorities, according to information provided by lawyers to the State Bar of Texas Department of Research and Analysis.

Tim Powers, managing partner of Dallas-based Haynes and Boone, said diversity has been a "historic part" of the firm, which was founded in 1970. He said the firm hired women lawyers beginning in the 1970s and minority lawyers in the 1980s. The firm's first minority lawyer was Sarah Saldana, who joined the firm in 1985

"It also helps, too, when the attorneys can see that we have female and diverse attorneys in leadership positions within the firm—when it's clear it's part of the firm's culture," said Phyllis Young.

and is now director of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Powers said the firm has for many years recruited bright, young, minority lawyers through a scholarship program now at six law schools, including the University of Texas School of Law, the University of Houston Law Center and the Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law. He said the students are invited to work as summer associates after their first year of law school. There's no guarantee of a job, but the program has benefited the firm's relationships with the law schools and gives the firm opportunity in many instances to "have the first look at some of the best minority scholars."

Powers said the firm has retained such a high percentage of minority lawyers in Texas in part because of a robust attorney development

program. He notes that just this week, the firm's executive committee approved 2016 priorities that include a big focus on diversity nationally.

Powers said his firm—like other firms—is aware that clients want a diverse group of lawyers doing their work, which is another reason to focus on retention of minority lawyers. The way to do so, he said, is to show minority lawyers that they have a future at the firm, with leadership and client opportunities.

Phyllis Young, hiring partner in the Houston office of Akin Gump, said the percentage of minority lawyers in the firm's Texas offices is relatively high for a number of reasons, including a focus on bringing in diverse candidates when doing law school recruiting and lateral hiring. Once the lawyers join the firm, she said, the focus shifts to retention-oriented initiatives including client development, attorney development and mentoring. The firm also encourages lawyers to get involved in minority bar associations and the Texas Minority Counsel Program.

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Young said the competition for minority lawyers hasn't waned in Texas, but she believes lawyers pay attention to the percentages of minority lawyers at each firm and what the firms are doing to retain minority lawyers.

"I've had candidates specifically write to me and tell me in interviews that one of the reasons that I chose Akin Gump was I saw all the things you were doing as a firm," Young said. "They can see the results. It makes a difference."