The Symposium on

UPWARD MOBILITY
AND RETENTION
OF AFRICAN AMERICANS
WITHIN THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION

School of Business
Center for Accounting Education
Washington, DC
Executive Summary

The Symposium on Upward Mobility and Retention of African Americans within the Accounting Profession

On December 2-3, 2010, the Howard University School of Business Center for Accounting Education (CAE) hosted leaders of the accounting profession to examine the status of African Americans within public accounting. Participants included partners, directors, managers and other professionals from a number of accounting firms, including the larger national and regional firms. Howard University faculty, senior members of the National Association of Black Accountants (NABA), the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) and various state societies of certified public accountants also attended.

In a series of presentations, panel discussions, and work groups, the participants reviewed the profession’s attempts to increase diversity at every level, including the partner ranks. Participants generally agreed that although improvements have been made over the years, the profession has fallen short of its goals. Too many talented African Americans (a term used inclusively throughout this paper to apply to blacks from the Caribbean and Africa as well as the United States)\(^1\) are being lost to other careers, and efforts to retain African Americans once they enter the profession must be a top priority.

Among the topics discussed: expanding the pipeline of new accounting students, raising the profession’s profile in the African American community, enhancing the professional prospects of African Americans who enter the profession, and boosting retention rates by tightening the bond between African American professionals and the accounting firms they work for. The Symposium also included a discussion around the role that African American professionals must take if they hope to be successful within the accounting profession.

Issues Facing African Americans in Public Accounting

The Symposium work groups identified broad challenges such as the profession’s low profile in the African American community, inadequate preparation for real-world situations by colleges and universities, and a range of cultural and other barriers facing African American men and women once they enter the profession.

The groups stressed the need for long-term commitment by both individuals and accounting firms and identified areas of specific responsibilities for each. They also identified “taboo” subjects that are often glossed over by silence, and raised basic questions about the standards used to measure students’ readiness to enter the profession.

Many of these items discussed in this document are included in the following comprehensive list:

Issues with Attraction

- Accounting Profession is invisible to accounting students
- There is an unclear value proposition for the profession
- Leaders in the profession don’t represent accounting to the public as interesting or attractive
- How can accounting compete with medicine and law for the best and brightest African Americans
- Appealing to a generation focused on work-life balance

\(1 The CAE is sensitive to the fact that individuals born and raised outside the United States, including significant numbers of non-whites from Caribbean and African nations, are not African Americans. For the sake of editorial ease, however, we have adopted “African American” as an inclusive term for a broader group of individuals who may face race-based or cultural barriers to advancement.
Issues with Universities and Colleges

- A lack of funding for scholarships in accounting
- Communicating the importance of having a master’s degree
- Faculty of “principles” classes are not engaging or appropriately grounded in the real world of accounting
- Insufficient preparation of students for the non-technical aspects of public accounting (motivation, work ethic, etc)
- Lack of relationship between firms and the universities/colleges
- Advisors discourage African Americans from accounting because it is not seen as “inviting” to their students

Retention: Concerns Around Individual Responsibility

- Focus too much on client service and not enough on building social networks, relationships, technical skills and brand
- Bias on behalf of African Americans
- Inattention to the “informal playbook”
- Not asking for feedback and misinterpreting it as racist when given
- Not prioritizing the CPA Exam
- Not being proactive in getting the right engagements
- Having the right mentors/sponsors and advocates

Retention: Organizational Responsibility

- Organizations must really commit and put the resources behind it, etc.
- Poor people management skills of seniors can be misinterpreted as racist among other things
- Lack of mentor/sponsor/advocate programs and opportunities
- Presence of bias
  - No safe place to discuss/acknowledge
  - Prevalent in performance management and talent management
- Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)/Business Resource Groups (BRGs)/affinity groups as currently structured are not seen as an asset to either employees or the organization
- Unclear ownership, strategy and tactics to advance African American women
- Lack of supervisory training including training on providing feedback particularly impacts African Americans
- Inclusion and cultural competence is not part of the leadership competency model and therefore no mechanism for holding leaders accountable
- There is a sense of cultural disengagement on teams and in offices for African Americans
- Recruiters do not look like “us” – recruiters need to be better trained around cultural diversity

Recruitment

- Is GPA the best indicator? The university attended? What determines success among African Americans? Can we really talk about this?
- What is the ratio of African American men on campus to women and other groups? How do we deal with this? Is there a talent vacuum among African American men, especially those born in the United States?

The following pages look at these key issues and examine both challenges and possible action steps identified during the Symposium.
FALLING SHORT: IDENTIFYING DIVERSITY BARRIERS

Not Good Enough

It’s time to speak plainly. Despite titanic efforts, solemn commitments from leadership of top firms, and the establishment of numerous diversity programs, efforts to expand minority participation in the public accounting profession have fallen short. Minorities hold only six percent of partnership positions at the nation’s largest accounting firms (those with 200 or more employees), and African Americans alone account for just one percent of all partners. While the data for smaller firms is less complete, the picture appears about the same across the entire profession. As the AICPA reports in its most recent look at industry demographics, “minority partnership has collectively not advanced.”

Rising to the partnership level, of course, takes time – perhaps 10 to 12 years in the larger firms. But the pipeline of new entrants who can aspire to leadership positions is not as full as it should be. At a minimum, the data suggests that growth has stagnated. Minority hiring rates for CPA firms have changed very little over the course of the last decade, edging up only modestly from 20 percent in 2000 to 22 percent in 2008, the last year for which data is available. For African Americans and Hispanics, hiring appears to have reached a plateau at four percent in 2008. Among minorities, individuals of Asian and Pacific Island heritage dominate, accounting for 12 percent of all new hires in 2008. Native Americans accounted for just two percent of new hires. Nor are the college ranks expanding. Minority enrollment in undergraduate accounting programs has been flat – “a disappointment,” the AICPA observes.

African Americans, who are the specific focus of this paper and of the CAE Symposium, are less inclined than accounting students in every other ethnic group to enter public accounting, and those who do accept work in public accounting, appear to leave the profession in larger numbers. AICPA data shows that some 35 percent of all accounting graduates in 2008 took jobs in public accounting as did those of both Asian and Hispanic heritage. But only 21 percent of African Americans chose public accounting for their first position after graduation. (Fifty-three percent of whites accepted jobs in public accounting.) The data makes clear that even without attracting additional students to major in accounting, we could increase the presence of African Americans in the accounting profession by persuading more graduates to choose a public accounting career.

Nor are African Americans achieving CPA status with the same frequency as other groups. It is not just an issue of increasing the number of African American students electing accounting as their major in college. The profession must also attract more African American college graduates into the profession.

2Reigle, Dennis R., AICPA, “2009 Trends in the Supply of Accounting Graduates and the Demand for Public Accounting Recruits”
3Ibid., AICPA, “2009 Trends”
4Ibid., AICPA, “2009 Trends”
“[T]his underrepresentation of minorities in the profession is unacceptable from both a societal and business perspective,”5 the U.S. Treasury’s Advisory Committee on the Auditing Profession observed in 2008. That’s troubling. In an increasingly diverse, multi-cultural world, public accounting firms must be similarly diverse to most effectively deliver the robust audits, other financial oversight, and counsel required by the large global and national corporations they serve. Our response must be to keep on keeping on.

Barrier: African Americans Are Opting Out of Public Accounting

There would almost certainly be more African American partners if more young professionals who enter the profession stayed long enough to reach the top rung. As previously stated, African Americans are less likely than other groups to choose public accounting when they finish college and many of those who do, don’t stick around. Relatively large numbers of African Americans who begin in public accounting tend to switch career paths and resign their positions after just a few years. In a profession that rewards longevity, these patterns make it much more difficult to achieve diversity goals.

In an effort to understand this phenomenon better, CAE surveyed African Americans who left public accounting to learn more about why they had changed course.6 The most common reason for their departure was a desire to improve “work-life balance,” (this is no different from the reasons given by other groups). However, two-thirds of those surveyed also acknowledged that they did not feel fully integrated into their firms. Significantly, the survey made clear that performance was not the issue. Four out of ten said they were among the top performers in their firms with “above average” rankings on their most recent annual evaluations. Another 56 percent were rated “average” and only 4 percent received unsatisfactory (“below average”) reviews.

If the evaluations given these individuals were “honest” evaluations, performance clearly was not an issue. Above all else, achieving true diversity requires the profession to do a better job of retention. It won’t matter how many African Americans firms hire, if we cannot do a better job of keeping them there. Doing so will require us to address a number of different barriers and identify a wide range of strategies as discussed at the Symposium and summarized in the following pages.

Barrier: It’s the Culture

Most of those surveyed by CAE indicated that they simply felt out of place or that they didn’t belong in their firms. Even after two-to-five years on the job, two-thirds of those surveyed stated they did not feel fully integrated into their organization. Despite mentoring programs and extensive diversity training at firms across the profession, cultural problems remain a significant barrier for African Americans in the accounting profession. As noted in CAE’s 2007 CPA Examination Summit: “There is a perception [among African Americans] of restricted access to partnership opportunities and leadership positions.”7

“Peers never seem to fully understand where I’m coming from or [my] perspective on life and decisions,” one African American professional told

6Howard University School of Business Center for Accounting Education, “Demystifying the Exodus from Public Accounting,” December 2008
7Howard University School of Business Center for Accounting Education, “2007 CPA Examination Summit: Insights Into Increasing the Number of African American CPAs,” June 2007
the CAE survey team. “I think corporate America will always be a culture that is foreign to minorities,” said another.

Many African American professionals believe they are always in the spotlight because of their race and that they must perform better than white peers to get credit for good work.

“In many settings, I found myself being one of few (or the only) minorities,” said another who opted to leave the profession. “I always felt like I carried a greater burden of demonstrating my skill sets compared to non-minority counterparts.” Many of the Symposium participants agreed that having this feeling in 2010 shows the lack of progress the profession has made over the past 20 years.

Symposium participants also said that cultural issues were real, particularly for younger people who are the first in their family to earn a college degree and/or work in a white-collar corporate culture. They agreed that overcoming cultural challenges required difficult effort by the young African American professionals as well as accounting firms.

“You talk about first-generation folks, of whom I was one, coming into public accounting; you’re ignorant of a lot of things. You don’t know that it’s a game. You don’t know how to play it. You’ve got to learn it. You’ve got to have people who care about you who can get you ready. If the firms are serious about diversity, it’s a two-way street, and they have to be sensitive to the minority experience and understand that, if they’re interested in keeping people,” said one Symposium participant.

One of the young accountants surveyed by CAE said he managed to fit in by learning from experience: “Having interned twice before coming on board full time, I was able to experience the politics involved in corporate America,” he said. But he added that he also benefitted from a change in culture because of new leadership in his office.

And, firms don’t do as much as they can to overcome the cultural barriers, seemingly assuming that new hires will figure out the unstated rules and mindset that govern the workplace. One notable shortcoming cited in CAE’s 2010 “Success Model” paper, is the failure in many firms to provide first-line supervisors, themselves relatively new professionals with but two or three years experience, the support or training they need to provide an inclusive environment and manage bias. That’s especially counterproductive because the direct supervisor may play the largest role in whether the new African American associate feels at home in the firm and is ready to make the commitments needed for success.8 Ineffective people management by these young, inexperienced supervisors can be misinterpreted as racism, widen the cultural divide, and reduce retention of African Americans. For this reason, many of them are afraid to give the minority staff honest and immediate feedback that will help the minority staff not make the same mistake again.

**Barrier: Mentoring Failure**

A good mentor can make the difference between career success and failure. In a 2009, white paper, “Staying the Course on Diversity,” Howard University professor and retired KPMG partner Frank Ross notes the fragile confidence of some young professionals, especially those in the first generation in the corporate world, and observed: “The single greatest source of confidence is a good mentor.”9 New African American partners surveyed by CAE in 2010 said that on a scale of 1 to 5, a good mentor ranked 5 as a key to

---

8CAE, “Retaining African Americans in the Accounting Profession: A Success Model,” pp. 2 and 12, February 2010

9CAE, “Staying the Course on Diversity: Making A Commitment to Build a Stronger Accounting Profession,” August 2009
success. Symposium participants echoed this view. One speaker gratefully recalled the partner “who pulled me under his wing when I did some very stupid things early in my career… the sponsoring is key.”

Others at the Symposium distinguished between a mentor and “a sponsor” as one who goes beyond simple mentoring to actively seek opportunities for the young professional and speaks up for him or her behind the scenes.

Most large firms and many smaller ones have embraced the concept of mentoring, often by assigning mentors to enable integration and help newcomers learn the corporate culture. Assigned mentors often provide value as sounding boards and counselors. Some also become advocates who look out for the young professional’s interest and fight for them behind the scenes.

But experience has identified limits with formal mentoring. Assigned mentors are not always fully vested in the success of the program or the individuals assigned to them. In some instances, despite good intentions and commitment, assigned mentors lack the skills to be effective. Many of the departing professionals surveyed by CAE said their mentors were not sufficiently pro-active in helping them advancing their career, navigating past pitfalls, or landing the best assignments. Only 50 percent responding to a previous CAE survey in 2006 said they were receiving beneficial mentoring from their current employer. Three-quarters of respondents believed that the most fruitful mentoring relationships are outside their current work environment. This would lead one to ask why these relationships are not more common within the firm.

**Barrier: A Deficit of ‘Essential’ or ‘Soft Skills’**

While cultural barriers remain significant, they are certainly lower than the hurdles faced by the African American professionals who have reached partnership ranks over the past several decades. Their success, built on great individual effort and often with the assistance of an inside advocate, demonstrates that African Americans can and will continue to advance within public accounting. Symposium participants worried, however, that many of today’s professionals lack many of the ‘essential’ or ‘soft skills’ needed to find a fit within their firm. They attribute this problem, in part, to the failure of colleges and universities to fully prepare students for the non-technical aspects of success as well as a disconnect between faculty and the real world of accounting. Distant relationships between firms and colleges also contribute to a gap between academia and the work environment. 

Symposium participants said the preparation gap is compounded by an inherent tension between the compromises needed to fit in and the equally important desire to be proud of and affirm one’s African American heritage. Organizations have norms and codes of behavior that apply, at least implicitly, to all employees.

“If we are going to be honest, we’ve got to be real. Sometimes you have to modify yourself if you want to be successful. For example, if you want to play for the New York Yankees, I think you’re going to shave. So there’re going to have to be some adjustments. And you have to be honest with folks. If that is a requirement, then you’ve got to let them know that. But, there are some things that the firm needs to do in terms of changing its culture as well if it wants to attract that talent. It is a two-way street.”

But firms and other organizations also must respect their people for who they are, and for the different perspectives they offer because that is the true meaning of diversity. One Symposium participant offered the analogy of “A Peacock in the Land of the Penguin” and said that early in his career he tried unhappily to sublimate his

---


11 Ibid., CAE, “NABA Membership Survey”
personality by figuratively donning a penguin suit until his mentor told him “Take that off... we hired you because you are a peacock.”

**Barrier: They (the Majority) Just Don’t Get it**

One critical barrier is the distance that separates the experience of the white professionals who still dominate the accounting profession from that of African Americans and other minorities trying to make their way in an environment they may not fully understand. Overt racial and institutional barriers have been swept away, but human misunderstanding and fear can still get in the way of progress.

One Symposium participant told the story of a white colleague who confessed: “I want to be honest with you. When I look at minorities who are on my account and a white person on my account, I give the white people the honest feedback. I may not give the entire honest feedback to the African American. I said, ‘Jim, let’s talk about that for a second. Let’s just play this scenario. What I’m hearing is that you have two managers on the account. The white person is getting feedback throughout the engagement for six or nine months. So when it’s time to write that performance review, their performance is going to be better, because they had the opportunity to improve and get better on things they needed to work on. The African American on the account is assuming that everything is going just fine. And when they receive that review, they get surprised on the back end. Jim, you are doing them a disservice. The minority needs to get that feedback right up front, just like the other person.’ He says, ‘yes, but I’m afraid about backlash.’ So this is incredibly complex. The reality is our firms are just like this country.”

African Americans also face “confirmation bias” – the tendency to interpret events or performance to confirm a personal belief. For example, some members of a firm may presume that graduates from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) received less rigorous training or have been hired solely to improve a firm’s diversity score. Disappointing work or cultural issues involving an African American confirm the bias and reduce managers’ inclination to reach out to African American colleagues or take other actions to advance diversity.

Confirmation bias can contribute to illogical and counterproductive behavior. For example, colleagues may make personal accommodations for individuals from another country who struggle with communications because “they are learning our language,” while African Americans may be discounted because of their diction or a tendency to talk in vernaculars that are unfamiliar or alien to the white majority.

Bias also can work against African Americans because some partners may choose to “protect” them from tough assignments. But that type of protection actually damages the African American’s career by denying him or her the opportunity to demonstrate ability and to acquire the level of work experience necessary to advance.

**Barrier: Work-Life Balance**

The retention challenge is compounded by the fact that many young professionals of all races and ethnicities say that the accounting profession is too demanding on their personal life. Indeed, the CAE survey reported that work-life balance was the single largest reason cited by African Americans for leaving the profession. Individuals responding to CAE’s survey cited “increased stress level due to increased hours” and “too much traveling,” among others, as reasons for their departure.

One Symposium participant voiced puzzlement. She observed that young doctors and attorneys face similar or greater stress, but aren’t as quick to give up on their professions. But, whatever differences exist between generations, the fact remains –the desires of many of today’s young
professionals may conflict with the profession’s work environment. Finding ways to alleviate this clash is essential to persuading young African Americans (as well as everyone) to build long-term careers in public accounting.

**Barriers: Accounting is not “Cool”**

As they work to bring diversity to their ranks, accounting firms must compete with other professions to attract the best and most talented individuals. Winning that competition is an ongoing challenge, especially in the African American community where accounting simply lacks the cachet of other fields such as law and medicine. When we ask a youngster what he wants to be when he grows up, very few say “accountant.”

Television and movies routinely feature heroic doctors and lawyers, most of whom appear to be wealthy as well as smart. The images are enticing for young people trying to decide what professional dreams to pursue. Further, we all have personal experience with doctors and many of us know lawyers as well. But, the African American accountant as a role model is the person that most youngsters don’t see.

As one participant observed: “If you think of an accountant, you tend to think of white males with a white shirt... Children are watching these shows – law enforcement, the legal profession, the medical profession – you see more African Americans.”

This low profile makes it harder to attract the best and brightest and convince them to choose an accounting career. What’s more, according to Symposium participants, the accounting profession generally does a poor job of establishing its value proposition or selling its work as interesting, challenging, or important for societal welfare.

“One thing that struck me when I started teaching is the number of good top accounting students that I knew would be successful if they made a commitment to public accounting, but they chose to go to other professions [Wall Street, corporate America, federal government]. What message can you also send to the college graduate to get them excited about public accounting and get them to start in public accounting?” said one Symposium participant.

Even when African Americans study accounting in school, the vast majority opt for careers in business or other fields instead of public accounting. Beyond the issue of “cool,” are serious and continuing concerns about opportunity. As noted at CAE’s CPA Summit in 2007, the profession is plagued by “a perception of restricted access to partnership opportunities and leadership positions” for African Americans.12

**Barrier: Individual Responsibility and the CPA Deficit**

The climb to partnership requires young men and women of every race and ethnicity to demonstrate technical competence and also build “eminence” within the firm. They must take personal responsibility for stretching outside their comfort zone, actively reach out for opportunity, and build strong relationships across their firm.11 Over the longer-term, they would do well to develop an area of technical specialization and take advantage of their firms’ development programs.

The critical sine qua non for ascent to partnership is certification as a CPA. But large numbers of African Americans decide against this critical first step and opt out of the CPA exam – a choice that, by itself, puts a cap on their opportunities in public accounting. With the exception of Native Americans, African Americans are the least likely of all racial groups to hold a CPA.

Obtaining certification requires substantial commitment of time and money. In addition to a rigorous exam, candidates for CPA status also must complete a substantial number of additional course

---

12Howard University School of Business Center for Accounting Education, “2007 CPA Examination Summit: Insights Into Increasing the Number of African American CPAs,” June 2007
hours beyond their undergraduate degree. If an African American doubts real opportunity to advance in the profession or isn’t sure she wants to, reaching CPA status may not seem worth the effort. But failure to become a CPA closes off the opportunity for certain. Thus, encouraging more African Americans to become CPAs is a critical task.

THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

Reaching Diversity – Special Efforts, Not Special Standards

The drive for diversity is absolutely about equal opportunity and the right of every man and woman to achieve as greatly as their talents and performance allow. We do not seek or support special standards. Just as individuals deserve to be judged by their merits, firms and other organizations have the right to set performance standards and apply them equally to all.

The drive for diversity also reflects the firmly held belief, as spelled out during the Symposium, that diversity is essential for quality performance in today’s world. The diverse team offers the widest range of experience and perspective to inform the profession’s work and to broaden the insights that firms bring to client assignments. We agree with those who say “we want to assemble the best team.” We are convinced that the diverse team is the best team.

We urge special efforts because African Americans and other minorities continue to face a wide range of barriers in their bid to rise within the accounting profession. These barriers are not insurmountable, but negotiating them can be inordinately difficult. To help African Americans clear the barriers, to give them the belief that they are welcome within the profession, to encourage them to stay the course and commit to public accounting, and to build a stronger and truly diverse profession, special efforts are in order.

Solution: It Begins with Commitment

Achieving diversity goals begins with commitment – not just the belief, but the insistence that we will get the job done – across the profession and at every firm. At one time, many thought hiring enough minority professionals was all that was required to achieve diversity over time and that once in the door new hires would sink or swim on their own. But because of the increased numbers, more would advance to the higher levels.

It has turned out to be harder than that. What’s needed are committed firms with the attitude that each new hire can become a partner and that we will do what it takes to make that happen. That means surrounding new hires with the technical and financial assistance, the cultural environment, training, mentoring, and other support necessary – in the normal course of business. It also means spelling out at the start, a clear set of expectations for everybody a firm hires. Every individual should know up front what it takes to advance.

In a 2010 report on “A Success Model” for retention, CAE put it this way: “The organization’s structures and systems must be inclusive, beginning with a comprehensive on-boarding structure, and include all aspects of achieving success in public accounting.”

Individuals, too, must commit. They must perform professionally; achieve all professional benchmarks, including certification as a CPA; find a comfort level within the corporate culture; and have the strength to see it through when the road is rocky.

“It takes two to tango. We can’t focus on a single party, expecting them to change when their dance partner hasn’t. Our scope will need to include at least two parties: The African American accountants we hope to help and the professors, managers, and partners with whom they dance,”

In the real world, of course, some individuals will fall short of partnership. Some will not perform well enough despite all efforts. Some will find other goals, seek out other careers, or choose other lifestyles – this is normal and should be expected. But normal attrition alone will not keep the profession from diversity, if the commitment and support are strong enough.

**Solution: Individual Responsibility – and Courage**

Amid all the suggestions for action by accounting firms, Symposium participants also emphasized individuals’ responsibility to perform. Beyond technical competence, young African Americans may need to overachieve. They also must learn the soft skills to make their way in a corporate culture that may not always feel natural. A key skill, said one participant, is to identify the attributes you want people to know you for. “One attribute is hard working. Another one’s loyal. And, you have to be very intentional about planting those seeds in people’s minds,” he said.

“We’ve got to let them know it is hard work. You have to let them know that this is something that’s different for you, if you are a first-generation person,” one participant conceded. “I think we lead people down a bad path because we make them think that some outside force is going to lift them above the dirty work that has to be done, and it’s not,” added another speaker.

Another participant counseled young professionals to “ask questions, show they are hungry for knowledge, continue to outwork everybody, and make sure that they have the necessary requirements to sit for the CPA exams.”

Symposium participants also counseled young professionals to proactively seek important assignments, identify a mentor and also an advocate, insist on honest feedback, and commit to passing the CPA exam.

Finally, African Americans must answer adversity with courage. “The one thing that we don’t talk about enough as a part of essential skills is courage. You can’t go in and you can’t fold up when it gets hard. It is tough out there. If you want to be a successful business person, you can’t run and hide. You’ve got to take the heat, and you’ve got to have courage,” said one participant.

**Solution: Continuous and Early Support for New Hires**

Several Symposium participants said firms should introduce new hires to the firm’s culture and clarify expectations as soon as commitment letters are signed, and not wait until they report to work.

“We talked about programs where we are taking some of the new hires and giving them specific focused training, right up front – branding, executive presence, and being able to interact in this environment and how to play the game, if you will.” One example that can be expanded upon by the firms is CAE’s We’re About Success! program, which trains approximately 100 – 125 professionals with one year or less experience in the various soft skills needed to be successful as a new hire.

“We also talked about, for the first 30 days, making sure there is a touch point for every African American to talk to about the particular culture, what success looks like in that culture, and what they need to do; and giving them candid feedback right up front. … We’re talking about every organization having a process by which these employees are touched within the first 30 days.” This will require a change to the counselors and mentors assigned to the new minority hire.

Early support also should apply to the CPA exam. Some suggested making it clear in employment offer letters that new hires are expected to become CPAs because they are...
expected to become partners. Other Symposium participants said firms should treat the CPA exam the way that law firms treat the bar exam – as an investment in the future. The firms should provide new hires the time and financial resources necessary to become certified. In essence, sitting for the CPA exam should become the new hires most important assignment.

“The legal profession does this all the time. A lot of students entering a firm get a signing bonus, and in addition to that, there’s an opportunity to take out a bar loan, or other loans to help you fund living expenses, bar classes, or other things that you really need so that the summer after you graduate in May and before your start in September, your sole focus is studying for the bar. We need this in the accounting profession as well,” said one participant.

Similarly, CAE’s “Success Model” report urged firms “to expand their on-boarding programs, which today typically focus on technical skills and procedural matters, to add awareness, cultural, and interpersonal components. These efforts should provide buddy pairing, mentoring and coaching, and provide clear training on unconscious bias to mentors in order to prevent the impact of bias on the mentee.”

**Solution: Better Mentoring**

In every venue, mentoring stands out as a key. Long-established partners recall with affection those who guided them on their climb up the ladder; younger partners counsel new hires to find a good mentor; and many firms have instituted formal mentoring programs. But too often, mentoring efforts fall short. As noted above, mentors may lack commitment, interpret the job too narrowly, or simply are not very good at playing a guide role.

Options for improving the process include increased selectivity in assigning mentors, specialized training to develop mentoring skills, rotating new hires among mentors until a relationship clicks, or assigning the firm’s best performers as mentors to minority new hires.

Some suggested that firms complement mentoring through other strategies for achieving some of what mentors are supposed to do. For example, to ensure that African Americans have a fair shot at good assignments, some firms use a blind assignment system that isn’t aware of race, college or university, “so that every first-year who comes into the company must have the same number of hours on a highly visible-type client.” Other firms simply say that African Americans must be placed on top accounts.

**Solution: Link Diversity to the Evaluation Process**

In most business environments, money talks. Participants suggested taking advantage of that reality by treating diversity like other business objectives and incorporating it into performance reviews. Right now, a Symposium working group observed, “inclusion and cultural competence are not part of the leadership competency model and, therefore, there is no mechanism for holding leaders accountable.” Making clear that career advancement and bonus awards could suffer from unsatisfactory diversity results will persuade employees at all levels that diversity matters. Among specific suggestions:

- Make sure that diversity is a competency in the recruiting process so that individuals are measured on multi-cultural achievement as well as technical skills.

14 Ibid., CAE, “Success Model”
“People shy away when you say you have to go to diversity training. As a diversity practitioner, I know that people don’t like to do that. So you merge multicultural training into existing training curriculums.”

Solution: Smarter Training

While every large firm and many smaller firms provide a range of diversity training, participants said the profession must be more creative in addressing the way people think and enable them to identify their own unconscious biases. Training needs to help employees at all levels consider how the world may look to a minority professional. It also must teach people to overcome fear of conflict so they can speak honestly with minority colleagues.

Some participants said incorporating diversity into every aspect of organizational training might be more effective than branded “diversity training.”

“People shy away when you say you have to go to diversity training. As a diversity practitioner, I know that people don’t like to do that. So you merge multicultural training into existing training curriculums. We’re starting to do that at my firm because some of the ‘soft skills’ are really the hard skills,” explained one Symposium participant.

Indeed, many firms have embraced new types of leadership training so that every manager and every partner “learns how to lead inclusively” and consider diversity as they review plans, teams, and client engagements.

“We had a very heavy discussion about anti-racism, racism awareness, training, bias training, multicultural training – and to really have training embedded into leadership training – it’s leadership training so that it’s embedded into every culture,” one said of an effective training approach.

Firms also should provide basic management training to young front-line supervisors, particularly in enhancing self-awareness and recognizing bias. Too often, firms act as if technical competence will automatically translate into supervisory ability. But that assumption works to the detriment of both the new manager and the even more junior new hires they are responsible for when the new supervisor struggles as a manager.

That’s a significant problem because “the supervisor is the person most responsible for whether African American associates (or those of any other background) under their supervision, feel connected, part of the team, and continuously learn and grow – and thus more likely to choose to commit to a long-term career in public accounting.”

Another Symposium participant said that advanced training for the HR team can pay huge dividends by sensitizing a group with firm-wide influence:

“Really training your HR folks and your leadership on the biases that exist during those performance management meetings when biases come out or when someone is being talked to about performance so that HR, or whoever is in the room...”

---

13 Ibid., CAE, “Success Model”
can speak on it and say, ‘Wait a minute. What’s going on here? We need to take a step back.’”

**Solution: Marketing the Profession and Early Outreach**

Among the most perplexing challenges is how to raise the profession’s profile and make it a compelling career choice for young African Americans.

Panel participants suggested using social media and other Web tools to reach young people on their own turf. Others envisioned marketing campaigns involving prominent African Americans, who could talk about accountants as trusted advisers and counselors.

Suggestions included a broad-based marketing campaign funded by the profession, including the large firms and the AICPA. Some participants hoped for enhanced funding to revitalize existing outreach programs such as Accounting Career Awareness Program (ACAP), and noted that AICPA has had some success with programs targeted to high school students. One major firm has set up a program that assigns top executives to coach high school students through the college application process and build a relationship before students pick a major or make a career choice.

Other ideas included a targeted media campaign focused on middle school, high-school, community college students, faculty advisers, and college students who have yet to choose a major; boot camps that expose students to the profession; and new partnerships with professional and business organizations to tout the opportunities presented by an accounting career. Participants also suggested a campaign that talks frankly about the material and lifestyle benefits of an accounting career.

“We don’t like to talk about it, but you can really make some nice money if you’re a CPA. But that’s what the younger folks want. They want to go somewhere where they can make money.”

**Solution: Achievable, but Specific Goals**

While not directly related to recruitment or retention, establishing specific, but achievable goals seems a natural fit for a profession that focuses on metrics and measurement. Given the persistence of the challenge, modest goals may strike some as unduly conservative. But the clearly achievable goals may accomplish more than overly grandiose objectives. Modest, but consistent gains can mount quickly; the key is to achieve consistency as opposed to the up and down pattern of recent years.

As one participant said: “Why can’t we concentrate on the small numbers we have coming into the profession, increase our retention by one or two percent? When you think of the numbers that come in to the firms, if you just increase one percent, two percent, each year, 10 years from now, I’m sure you’ll be talking about a significant increase in the number of African American partners – a four or five percent number. It’s not going to happen overnight. But the same concept that happened with gender can happen if we look at things from that perspective.”

**Staying the Course**

Above all else, the Symposium made clear that there are no magic bullets – no simple solutions that will quickly expand the presence of African Americans in public accounting or elevate substantial numbers to the partnership level. What we face is a long, continuing struggle until we complete the journey that began some four decades ago when the profession first began to acknowledge that it needed to open its doors.

The Symposium discussed a range of ideas for marketing the profession in the African American community so that more African Americans would consider accounting as a viable career path. It also identified a variety of retention strategies to convince African American professionals to make a long-term commitment to accounting and to sit for
the CPA exam. Right now, African Americans are less likely to choose public accounting than other groups and appear more likely to leave the profession for other fields at a relatively early stage in their careers.

Symposium participants generally agreed that despite an honest desire to create a more diversified profession, cultural barriers continue to limit the advancement of African Americans to partnership ranks. Among the solutions are improved mentoring, special programs to help new hires navigate corporate cultures that make them uneasy, and smarter internal training that raises the sensitivity levels of majority employees and helps accounting firm employees of all races to bridge cultural divides.

More broadly, what’s needed is a renewed long-term commitment by both individuals and firms to keep on working until success is achieved. Individual African Americans must commit to developing the essential technical and soft skills to succeed. Firms must make an equal commitment to surround young African Americans with the support systems necessary to provide every opportunity to show their abilities and to move up as their performance merits.
When discussing diversity challenges, some barriers are so widely accepted that we talk about them freely and without controversy. Other topics, such as subtle racism, can be uncomfortable and we are less likely to raise them – especially when the room includes people of different racial backgrounds. Putting these topics off limits means we sidestep some significant challenges.

To help bring uncomfortable issues into the open, CAE deliberately established a working session on “taboo topics.” For African Americans to truly succeed in public accounting, we must openly confront every barrier, including some that take us out of our safety zone. Below are some of the taboos that the Symposium identified:

Less Than the Best?
Efforts to enhance diversity reflect a determination to create equal opportunity for talented individuals to advance up the ladder on a basis of performance. But if too many of the best and brightest African Americans choose law, medicine, engineering or other specialties ahead of accounting, our profession may be facing a talent gap that makes it far harder to achieve diversity goals. Said one Symposium participant:

“The typical hot shot black student thinks about being a doctor or a lawyer, so that may suggest that we have a talent vacuum, and that a lot of people we are recruiting really aren’t that good. … So, I think we really need to ask if the advancement rates are [affected] by the quality of who we are bringing in.”

He added: “When I’m trying to convince certain white people in the organization that they should be advancing black folks, and I let the semi-qualified black in, who then reinforces their bias that they are not that good, that’s not good.”

Confirmation Bias – Or, Just Bias
Whether conscious or sub-conscious, racial bias still exists. For example, some people assume that HBCUs are inferior and if you graduate from one “you are not as good.” These stereotypes sometimes extend to black professional organizations such as NABA or The Association of Latino Professionals in Finance and Accounting (ALPFA) and those who participate in them. “We always hear complaints about the quality of the organization, and then it goes back to the individual,” one workshop participant noted.

Confirmation bias compounds prejudice by seeming to validate it. As a result, poor performance by any African American may be treated as evidence against every black professional. If a non-minority makes a mistake, they typically get a second chance and the failure fades in memory, “but if a Howard University person lost a file, I’d hear about it for three years.”

Mistakes by a less competent white person will rightly be viewed as an individual matter, not a group failure. But such distinctions may be lost when a minority is at fault.

You Talk Funny
It turns out, appearance can matter and so can the way you talk – especially if you’re black.

Firms and other organizations have unspoken rules, often about how you dress, talk, and even wear your hair. Breaking those rules can hurt career prospects because others in the firm may conclude you don’t look or sound “professional.”

“We talked about professionalism and issues such as how you wear your hair, or your clothing, etc. It seems a taboo that a lot of people don’t want to talk about appearance issues, and that these are some of the things that can hold you back from advancing, but these things they need to hear,” one participant observed.

“Another taboo is our black diction that can hamper some of our associates,” another participant said. “Someone may not tell them that they have bad diction, and then they don’t get put on engagements. They just need to clean up their act in terms of their language.”

Can I Be Myself?
Some young professionals wrestle with the challenge of fitting in without rejecting their roots. Fitting into a new culture can be difficult, particularly if the adjustments might be seen as turning one’s back on personal or group heritage.

One participant recalled an African American
woman who asked: “How do I overcome my whole family, my parents, my grandparents telling me, ‘Don’t trust white people.’ Now I’m in the white world, how do I negotiate this and how do I reconcile this?”

Similarly, this participant added: “We also had a woman this year who talked black, and then when we called her on it, she said, ‘You know, I know I said that, but if I talk like that at home, they’ll tell me I’m talking white.’ So, it’s those kinds of things.”

**Solidarity: Easier When We Were Few**

Some Symposium participants worry that some newer partners aren’t doing enough to help the next generation. That can hurt retention by discouraging younger African Americans who seek encouragement by somebody who shares their experience at the most basic level.

“In the firms, how many black people are really about it [investing time in other blacks]? Are we really committed to mentoring the next generation of accountants who are African American?”

Ironically, some say the increasing presence of black Americans in the profession, though still small, may work against solidarity.

“I think in earlier times, when there were fewer of us, we kind of knew each other, so we kind of formed our own informal network, and I could call a PWC partner, I could call someone at Deloitte or EY, or they could call me if there was a problem. I don’t know if that exists today, but that helped us.”

**Female Solidarity – for White Women Only**

The accounting profession has done an excellent job of opening the doors to women, and women have helped themselves by building strong support networks. But African American women believe they have been largely bypassed by those developments, and they continue to experience the double negative of race and gender.

“One of the places where African American women have really gotten left behind is in the women’s networks,” one Symposium participant said. “The women’s networks have really turned into white women’s networks.”
While many young African Americans are struggling to find their place in the accounting profession, others have successfully navigated the barriers and made partner. CAE conducted in-depth interviews\textsuperscript{16} with many of the African Americans that were elected partners in 2010 to hear their perspective on what it takes to climb the ladder. While each journey is unique, a number of common themes emerged. Following is their list of shared success factors:

**Specialize**

Without exception, the partners we interviewed said young professionals should identify a specialty and become an expert. Developing deep knowledge of a specific industry or technical area can make you the “go to” person in an office or even across an entire firm which can ensure that you are routinely in demand on important engagements. A firm-wide reputation for quality work in specialized areas can help African Americans leap over barriers of race and firm culture.

**Participate in Development Programs**

Young professionals are also advised to participate in national development programs to expand their technical competence in a way that will be recognized by every member of their firm. Participation in these programs is a way to build a young professional’s personal “brand” and signal their long-term commitment to the profession.

**Commit and Integrate**

The new partners emphasize personal responsibility for one’s own career path by being pro-active about expanding their professional skills, learning the firm culture, and integrating themselves. While every firm will have people who want to help you along, their stake in your future will never be as great as your own. Bottom line: be your own advocate – develop skill sets that are in demand and let people know about it; do your best to get honest feedback on every assignment; and make sure that your evaluations are fair and truly reflect your earned rating.

The new partners also said that individuals who aspire to partnership must commit to do what is necessary to achieve, such as sitting for the CPA exam as early in their career as possible. While individuals owe it to themselves to consider options and offers from outside the profession, those who are on a partnership quest should consider whether other career alternatives will provide comparable long-term opportunity and satisfaction.

**Actively Seek the Right Mentor**

Finding your own mentor, one that you are comfortable with and who will become an advocate, may be as important as any other step. On a 1 to 5 scale, the new partners gave a solid 5 to a good mentor as a key to success. While they generally maintained a relationship with their assigned mentor as well, the new partners said assigned mentors were only rarely pro-active in helping them advance. By contrast, self-selected mentors become sponsors who work hard to identify opportunities for their younger colleagues. They also indicated that race should not be a limiting factor – most said that their mentor/sponsors were not African Americans. The most effective sponsors will be high enough within the firm so that they can influence what is going on, either within the firm, practice area, specialized industry or the regional office.

---

\textsuperscript{16}Op. cit., “Demystifying the Exodus from Public Accounting”
SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANTS

Panel Discussion

Moderator:
Frank Ross, Director - Center for Accounting Education – Howard University School of Business

Panelists:
Ken Bouyer, Americas Director – Ernst & Young
Kathy Hannan, National Managing Partner – KPMG
Gregory Johnson, Executive Director – National Association of Black Accountants
Gail Pitts, Chairperson – Minority Initiatives Committee – American Institute of CPAs

Keynote Speakers
David Harrison, Partner – Deloitte
Chris Simmons, Managing Partner – PricewaterhouseCoopers

Facilitators
John Honor, President and CEO – The Honor Group
Dr. Gwynette Lacy, Chairperson, Department of Management – Howard University School of Business
Kimberly Reed, Managing Partner – Reed Development Group
Dr. Louis Stewart, Associate Professor, Dept. of Accounting – Howard University School of Business
Leslie Traub, President and CEO – Cook Ross Inc
Jean Wells-Jessup, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Accounting – Howard University School of Business
**SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First</th>
<th>Last</th>
<th>Firm/Organization</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ostine</td>
<td>Swan</td>
<td>AICPA</td>
<td>Senior Manager of Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marvin</td>
<td>Allmond</td>
<td>Allmond &amp; Company</td>
<td>Managing Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdoel</td>
<td>Akran</td>
<td>Bert Smith &amp; Co.</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Willie</td>
<td>Bert Smith &amp; Co.</td>
<td>Managing Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorri</td>
<td>McWhorter</td>
<td>Crowe Horwath</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td>Crowe Horwath</td>
<td>Diversity Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregory</td>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>Deloitte</td>
<td>Partner - Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macon</td>
<td>Ware</td>
<td>Deloitte</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gioia</td>
<td>Pisano</td>
<td>Ernst &amp; Young</td>
<td>Diversity Recruiting Consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila</td>
<td>Brandenberg</td>
<td>Grant Thornton</td>
<td>Senior Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Green Resource Group</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kari</td>
<td>Bedell</td>
<td>GWSCPA</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barron</td>
<td>Harvey</td>
<td>Howard University</td>
<td>Dean, School of Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>Lewis</td>
<td>KPMG</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Lippert</td>
<td>KPMG</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Neal</td>
<td>KPMG</td>
<td>National Diversity Recruiting Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ned</td>
<td>Steele</td>
<td>Media Impact</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>Harris</td>
<td>NABA</td>
<td>National President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Avant</td>
<td>NABA</td>
<td>Past National President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lori</td>
<td>Braden</td>
<td>PA Institute of CPAs</td>
<td>Ass’t Vice-President - Strategic Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Brassell</td>
<td>PwC</td>
<td>US Office of Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>PwC</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janelle</td>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>PwC</td>
<td>Federal Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherrie</td>
<td>McCoy</td>
<td>PwC</td>
<td>Washington Metro Diversity Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>PwC</td>
<td>Campus Diversity Sourcing Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Radke</td>
<td>Robert Half International</td>
<td>Director of Training &amp; Staff Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacqueline</td>
<td>Bryant</td>
<td>Tate &amp; Tryon</td>
<td>Partner-Outsourced Accounting Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rashida</td>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>Tate &amp; Tryon</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>Skidmore</td>
<td>Tate &amp; Tryon</td>
<td>Director of HR</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Calvin Harris, NABA President and CEO
Gail Pitts, AICPA

Marvin Allmond, Allmond & Company; Sheila Brandenberg, Grant Thornton; and Jacquelyn Bryant, Tate & Tryon
About CAE
Recognized nationally as a prominent resource throughout the accounting profession, the Howard University School of Business Center for Accounting Education (CAE) addresses the diversity challenge by attracting more African Americans to the profession, and improving their rates of retention and upward mobility. Over the past seven years, CAE has flourished under the guidance of its director, Frank Ross and coordinator, Pat Kellibrew. With financial contributions from its generous stakeholders and input from its advisory board, together, they have been able to guide CAE to the forefront of respectability within the accounting profession.

Because of the unique challenges young African Americans face when entering the accounting profession, CAE offers initiatives that will prepare them to successfully maneuver the pitfalls they may encounter early in their career. Training is targeted for every stage of career development: students considering accounting as a career, young professionals beginning their career and preparing for the CPA exam, middle managers and potential senior leaders. During the past seven years, more than 1200 young professionals and students have benefitted from CAE programs.

CAE’s corporate stakeholders are among the profession’s leading firms and organizations and contribute resources, experience and expertise in the field of accounting. Representatives of the ever-increasing group of stakeholders actually participate in the training programs, providing participants with real-world scenarios that mirror their impending work environment.

CAE Mission Statement
• Provide initiatives that address the advancement of Blacks in the accounting profession through leadership skills training programs and Thought Leadership papers.
• Provide scholarships to needy accounting students and support accounting faculty development

CAE’s initiatives will supplement what the firms/corporations and profession are doing. Not a replacement/substitute for existing programs.

CAE Stakeholders
Bert Smith & Company
Thompson, Cobb, Bazilio and Associates
American Institute of Certified Public Accountants
BDO Seidman
Becker CPA*
Coleman & Williams
Deloitte
Ernst & Young
Grant Thornton
KPMG
McConnell, Jones, Lanier & Murphy
National Association of Black Accountants
NABA Division of Firms
PricewaterhouseCoopers
Walker & Co.
Williams, Adley & Company

* In-Kind Stakeholder
Center for Accounting Education
Howard University School of Business
2600 Sixth Street NW, Rooms 341-342
Washington, DC 20059

We’re About Success!

Frank Ross, Director
202.806.1637
fross10130@earthlink.net

Pat Kellibrew, Coordinator
202.806.1643
pkellibrew@howard.edu

www.howardcae.org