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advancement of Black CPAs, offer insights on the present and future state of the profession's diversity.

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Three leaders of the Black CPA Centennial's organizing partners — whose everyday missions support and promote the advancement of Black CPAs — offer insights on the main barriers Black professionals face, the roles their organizations play in helping overcome those barriers, and what the CPA profession can do collectively to progress in achieving diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The organizations

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CPAs by providing the most relevant knowledge, resources, and advocacy. NSBCPA also promotes cultural competence, diversity, and inclusion within the profession.

Recognizing barriers

Lack of exposure to the profession and all it has to offer, as well as to the people within it, is a significant hurdle for ambitious Black professionals, according to Guylaine Saint Juste, president and CEO of NABA. College leaders have also told her that sometimes Black students don't see themselves being successful in the field because of the small number of Black CPAs.

Darryl Matthews, NSBCPA president and CEO, agreed. "I grew up in a middle-class Black neighborhood where I saw Black doctors, pharmacists, police officers, and teachers," Matthews said. "But there were not a lot of CPAs."

Because of the small number of Black CPAs, school counselors also do not think to direct Black students into the profession, according to Odysseus Lanier, CPA, DOF chair and a partner at McConnell & Jones LLP. According to Lanier, the profession also has not made outreach to younger Black students a sufficient priority.

What the organizations can do

To promote greater awareness, Saint Juste thinks a brand campaign could continue to raise the profession's visibility among Black students — building the same enthusiasm that's now associated with tech careers — and highlight the many types of roles for accountants and the benefits of an accounting career.

Equipping Black students and early professionals to pass the Uniform CPA Examination is a significant concern for the NSBCPA, according to Matthews. He believes the CPA credential provides Black accountants with recognized value that

cannot be ignored. “Once you’ve qualified, you are among the best,” he said. “There’s

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Driving change

Once Black students take a job, firms and organizations should ensure that they have the same chances as other new professionals. “If you never work with people of color, you may not think of them as having the technical and soft skills to be successful,” Lanier said. As a result, those staff members may not attract the mentors or sponsors they need to learn the ropes and get the best assignments. “They won’t be able to demonstrate they’re as capable as people who don’t look like them,” he said. Firms and employers aware of these hurdles can take steps to correct them.

Those in charge of hiring may be looking for Black aspiring CPAs in the wrong places. The problem, according to Lanier, is that recruiters focus their efforts on schools with majority-white enrollments. Because of the low percentage of Black students in accounting programs at those schools, this approach “is a huge barrier to entry,” he said. As a result, he said recruiters should engage more with historically Black colleges and universities to find the students they are seeking.

CPA firms can support the advancement of Black accounting professionals by becoming engaged in these organizations’ work through donations or other types of involvement. The DOF, for example, can connect firms with Black-owned member firms that are available to subcontract. “That exposes firms to the available talent,” Lanier said. “We would like to have more involvement with the largest firms, to have them speak to our membership and learn about our firms and their CPAs’ capabilities.”

NABA is interested in helping find ways to broaden the talent pool. For example, NABA would enthusiastically help pilot an effort to expand recruiting to Black liberal arts students and develop innovative ways to offer them the accounting education they need, Saint Juste said.

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Cromwell Jr., Mary T. Washington Wylie, Elmer J. Whiting Jr., William Louis Campfield, and Larzette Hale paved the way for Black CPAs — they were heroes,” Matthews said. “They were ordinary people with an extraordinary goal, that being to be the first Black person to achieve a distinction that others before them were not allowed to achieve.”

“We have a long, winding road to go down,” Lanier said. “We have to go forward with the same degree of grit and fortitude.” The result will be positive for the profession and for the Black professionals who seek to join or advance in it.

The organizations in this article are continuing to support Black CPAs and accountants as they take the next steps. “In the future, we want to keep moving forward and have strong programs with clear outcomes to address the various pipeline, retention, and advancement issues,” Saint Juste said. “We want to build excitement among young Black students for the field of accounting and evolve the profession to where they, too, can see themselves excelling and having a place in leadership.”

*The **Black CPA Centennial** is a yearlong effort to honor, celebrate, and build upon the progress Black CPAs have made in shaping the accounting profession. The celebration is a collaborative effort of the AICPA, Diverse Organization of Firms, Illinois CPA Society, National Association of Black Accountants, and National Society of Black CPAs.*

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— **Anita Dennis** is a freelance writer based in New Jersey.

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