

Within the Community of Scientists

Why have black scientists, engineers, and health professionals formed black associations? What is the nature of black scientists' participation in "mainstream" science organizations and what do they expect from these groups? These questions were the focus of discussion at a Black History Month program at the AAAS where black scientists and physicians shared their perceptions on the role of "separate" and "mainstream" associations in the careers and lives of black science professionals.

Generally, black professional associations are either over 40 years old or were formed about 15 years ago during the civil rights movement of the late 1960's. The older associations came about because of segregation, separation of races, and discrimination against blacks that prevented their full participation in

the affairs of society—such as being unable to attend scientific meetings at hotels which barred blacks, or being denied membership in local medical associations.

The newer black scientific associations reflect the special concerns of black scientists and engineers today. In most cases, their formation did not result in a schism with blacks going off to their own groups but in an awareness that different groups have different priorities.

W. Montague Cobb, distinguished professor emeritus at Howard University, talked about the conditions which led to the establishment and continuation of the 89 year-old National Medical Association (NMA). He described how the black perspective in medical research and practice led to early NMA support

for national health insurance, for increased numbers of black physicians, and for heightened attention to the diseases which impact the health status of black Americans. These stands have often been at open variance with those of the mainstream medical establishment.

Alicia E. Hastings, professor and chair, Department of Physical Medicine, Howard University, is in the minority in her field, both as a woman and as a black physician. She told the audience about her participation in mainstream organizations and what she gets from and gives to these groups. Hastings belongs to the NMA as well as to the American Medical Association and the mainstream societies of her specialty. For many people like Hastings, the issue is not which group to join but how to manage the multiple memberships made necessary by the limitations in scope of each group—to meet the needs of the professional self *and* the black professional self.

William Jackson, professor of chemistry at Howard University, related the history of the National Organization of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers. He also characterized his expectations of mainstream associations.

"They can be advocates for certain points of view. But most of the time those organizations do not address themselves to issues that are of *particular* concern to blacks. The other part of the issue, Jackson said, is what the organization itself is doing about the underrepresentation of large segments of the population in a given field. His view is that "In any profession that has an underrepresentation of a significant number of people . . . something is wrong. Something is wrong with that profession. . . . We do not know what kind of talent we are missing . . . and the professional society ought to address that problem."

Alvin Goins, retired chief of personality and cognition research, National Institute of Mental Health, discussed the formation of the Black Association of Psychologists. He noted that unlike chemistry and physics, where one might argue a certain isolation of subject matter from racial/ethnic considerations, the very fabric of psychology—curriculum, research questions, methodology, and clinical practice—is inseparable from

Black Engineers

The first automatic lubricator, gas masks first used by firemen, a revolutionary refining process for sugar, advanced electric trolley cars, and carbon filaments and threaded sockets for light bulbs all are technological contributions made by black engineers.

At a luncheon seminar during Black History Month, Carol Morning, vice president for research, National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (NACME), detailed the evolution of the "minorities in engineering" effort from an assortment of effective but narrowly focused national projects and advisory groups linked by associations of project leaders and NACME. NACME and its predecessors have provided career information to students who knew nothing about engineering, distributed scholarship funds contributed by corporations and foundations, identified for college recruitment students with promise in engineering, and offered a wide range of academic enrichment programs to high school and college students.

Theodore Habarth, president and chair of the board of the National Consortium for Graduate Degrees for Minorities in Engineering (GEM) discussed the role of GEM in encouraging and financially supporting graduate engineering work for minority students. GEM, a consortium of corporations and universities, is the third component of the intervention effort which includes precollege and college level programs.

Citing projections of increasing engineering manpower needs and an increasing proportion of minority groups in the U.S. school age population, speakers urged action to make the most of existing programs and to increase private and governmental support for such efforts at precollege, college, and graduate levels.