

Minorities Create a Career Path for Success with COAP

Program Provides Foundation for College

Kelvin Joseph, CPA never imagined a career as a CPA but thanks to the New York State Society of Certified Public Accountants' Career Opportunities in the Accounting Profession (COAP) Program, he has launched a career with Ernst & Young LLP, one of the Big Four accounting firms, as a Senior Auditor. COAP has provided a residency-based learning experience that exposes promising minority high school students to accounting and business careers.

According to *The Supply of Accounting Graduates and the Demand for Public Accounting Recruits – 2003*, published by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), only 3% of the 17% of ethnic/racial CPAs are African-American, a statistic that has stayed the same for three years in a row.

COAP offers students a tailored curriculum in accounting and finance and extensive opportunities to interact with successful minority CPA role models and gain exposure to the corporate environment. Students apply for the program in the Spring and are interviewed in a group setting, a selection process used by the Society to find students serious about the COAP program.

Since its inception in 1987, over 1,000 students have completed the COAP Program. Most of these students have finished college and entered the business profession.

Joseph, a graduate of the 1996 COAP class, is now a senior auditor at Ernst & Young LLP, one of the Big Four accounting firms, and is president of the New York Chapter of the National Association of Black Accountants. He also serves on the Minority Initiatives Committee of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants.

“COAP focused my interests in business and exposed me to new opportunities,” says Joseph. “It taught me to be my best, to make a difference and to live my life with passion.”

Over the past year, more college students have been majoring in accounting. Starting salaries in the accounting profession range from \$35-\$50,000. A more experienced CPA earns \$250,000+.

COAP is based on a model that began in 1982 in Seattle, Washington as an initiative of the local chapter of the National Association of Black Accountants. Since that time, 25 programs have been added around the country including the Society's (see accompanying AICPA chart).

The New York State Society of Certified Public Accountants introduced the program in 1987 at Pace University in New York City. The program is now offered at seven New York college campuses: Hofstra University (1997), Long Island University in Brooklyn and Westchester Community College (2001/2002) and Le Moyne College in Syracuse (2002/2003), SUNY Brockport in Rochester and the College of Saint Rose in Albany (both added this year).

Participating students learn about business opportunities and how to make a more informed decision about a career choice. At the same time, COAP addresses the concern that too few minority students are entering the accounting profession in public accounting, private industry, government, and education.

Minorities represent approximately one-fourth of the entire U.S. population. New York City public schools have long been substantially minority-majority; more than 85% of the public school children are minority.

"The Society has a group of CPA leaders who are extremely committed to diversity in our profession," says John Kearney, CPA, the Society's President. One of these leaders is Immediate Past President Jeffrey Hoops, CPA who helped expand COAP during his presidency.

Another Past President for the Society, Bert N. Mitchell, CPA, Managing Partner of Mitchell & Titus, LLP, received the Society's COAP Legacy Award this year for establishing COAP during his presidency in 1987. Says Mitchell, "The COAP Program has contributed greatly in exposing youngsters from minority communities to opportunities in the accounting profession. Historically, our

profession has not been well represented by ethnic minorities but over the last three decades, we have made significant progress in improving our diversity. Yet, there is still work to be done, and I am proud to know that the Society has strongly committed its continued support to this program.”

C. Daniel Stubbs, Jr., a member of the Society’s Board of Directors and former Chair of the Pace COAP Advisory Board, is another example of the continuing commitment of the Society’s membership. “The Advisory Board set as the mission of the program that we assist high school students from underrepresented populations to succeed in college. We treat it as a plus if they major in accounting or business.”

The Society honored four COAP graduates at its annual election dinner this year including Kelvin Joseph, CPA, (Sandra Latorre, Shawn C. Valentine, CPA and Doyle G. Brown, Jr.

Latorre, a 2001 COAP graduate, is a junior at Pace University’s Lubin School of Business, majoring in Public Accounting. She recently enrolled in the Master’s in Business Administration curriculum and Honors College at Pace University and is an Executive Board member in the Association of Latino Professionals in Finance and Accounting at Pace.

Latorre has worked as an orientation assistant at Pace and has participated in the Deloitte & Touche National Leadership Conference in Arizona, as well as the Diversity Leadership Program at St. John’s University sponsored by Monster.com and PricewaterhouseCoopers. She interned at PricewaterhouseCoopers this summer. “COAP put me on the path of success and this summer I was able to help out by being a counselor at the Pace COAP Program,” Latorre said.

Valentine is a Senior Accountant for Inova Health System, the largest healthcare provider in Northern Virginia. He also has his own accounting firm with a client base that includes many professional athletes such as Shannon Briggs, Errict Rhett and Michael Reese. He is a graduate of Loyola College in Baltimore and is currently enrolled in its master’s program.

“COAP was not just a program for me,” says Valentine, “it was an outlet; it enabled me to envision more than just sports or entertainment as a way out of inner-city living.”

Brown completed an internship with Deans Archer & Co., a certified public accounting firm, and CMP Media Inc. He graduated this spring with a degree in Accounting from Delaware State University and has begun a graduate program toward a Master of Business Administration degree. His long-term professional goal is to become a university and professor researcher He plans to take Part I of the CPA exam shortly.

“As a result of my experiences as a student in the summer residency program, “ says Brown, “I wanted to give back. I made the decision to return to COAP each year as Head Male Counselor as well as a Male Staff Counselor.”

This year, 164 students attended the summer programs to learn practical accounting and business skills, as well as what to expect at college and how to parlay courses into a career. In recruiting students for COAP from private and public schools, the Society focuses on minority groups historically underrepresented in the profession.

COAP creates a program for students with multiple career interests. Rather than simply promote accounting as a career, COAP promotes higher education in general. In addition to providing resources for finding one’s own path, COAP also teaches how to prepare for and conduct oneself on a job interview and other practical skills such as how to dress for an interview.

The curriculum at the various programs covers accounting concepts, business ethics, college preparation, resume writing, networking, mock interviews, financial statement analysis, case studies, public speaking and how to get scholarships and internships.

In the classrooms and on firm visits, many words of advice and encouragement are doled out to COAP participants by young CPAs within the firm who describe why they chose the accounting profession and how their career has progressed. Faculty at COAP sessions report students recognize accounting as a field where they’ll always be able to find work, and where their aptitude and enthusiasm for math will make them successful.



“Never underestimate where life is going to take you,” said Sophia Cohall, vice president of finance at Marsh Inc. “and take the time to learn the skills that will take you there.”

Cohall spoke at the Brooklyn Long Island University campus on the power of effective communication in business life. “COAP is something I wish I had when was in high school in Brooklyn,” she said.

The Society supplements the COAP effort to inform high school students about opportunities in the profession with other campaigns, such as chapter-based outreach programs and full-day sessions at the Society’s headquarters.

The NYSSCPA website includes an extensive description of the COAP program, including an archive of past articles that have appeared in *The Trusted Professional*. You can find it by going to www.nysscpa.org and clicking on the “Future CPAs” link at the top of the page.

NYSSCPA wants to expand COAP throughout New York. To find out more about COAP, visit the Society’s website at www.nysscpa.org or contact William Pape, the Society’s Director of Membership at 212-719-8420 or wpape@nysscpa.org.

Photographs:

- *COAP students, Doyle G. Brown, Jr. COAP class of 1997 and Sandra Latorre, COAP class of 2001 (from Annual Dinner)*
- *Kelvin Joseph, CPA.*
- *This year's COAP students at the Brooklyn Long Island University campus gather around Sophia Cohall, vice president of finance at Marsh Inc., who spoke on effective communication skills. "Never underestimate where life is going to take you. And then take the time to learn the skills that will take you there," Cohall said.*