

A Face Like Mine

UHD Professor Creates Unique Outreach Program for Underserved Students

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By Anne McDonald Davis

r. Alicia Yancy is proud of her accounting classes at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD). At the diverse campus, 45 percent of the student population is Latino and 25 percent African American. For the numbers who hail from inner-city neighborhoods in Texas' immense gulf coast city, education is often the gateway to financial security and a better world, sometimes for entire families.

Yancy recalls: "There's a young man, Kareem, and we were talking about the difference that being an accountant has made for his life and the lives of others in his family. He was waiting tables and a gentleman began coming in, a retired CPA, who encouraged Kareem to pursue a career in accounting. Five years later, Kareem was making over \$100,000 a year! His wife also got an accounting degree and is a school principal. They now have the resources to help their siblings pursue training and higher education."

One detail about Kareem's experience that stuck in Yancy's mind was that when he met UHD accounting professor Dr. George



Dr. Alicia Yancy and the Men of Color in Accounting Group

Gamble, he was the first black CPA the young man had ever encountered.

"My female students would ask for help, but the male students just wouldn't," she laments. "No matter how often I suggested they come to office hours or encouraged them to ask questions in class ... no. So I decided to try something different."

Yancy began calling successful black men she knew in the Houston business and accounting community – the senior director of security for Waste Management, a retired FBI accountant, a tax manager at Deloitte, the manager for the Houston Inroads office and other black male faculty in accounting education like Dr. Gamble (coincidentally Yancy's own mentor).

She asserts: "I wanted these young men to see people who looked like them, who walked

and talked like them – men who had come up with some of the same experiences and challenges they were facing. I intentionally called the organization Men of Color in Accounting (MOCA), because the plan is to include all UHD minority, underserved male accounting students."

It worked. "The students were incredibly receptive," Yancy enthuses. "The day of our initial meeting – April 25, 2015 – every single young man invited was there and was there early. We were set to begin at 9, and my students were there at 8:30. They were so eager to be engaged ... I just think that's awesome."

Yancy had intended to simply get her students together with men who could serve as mentors and bow out. She laughs remembering that plan, but has no regrets



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about the time she has spent growing the initiative.

She reports: “Interestingly, a little more than a year later, students who were really not planning to declare accounting as a major now are. They tell me, ‘I’m changing my major. I’m really focusing on school now so that I can focus on my grades and have a career opportunity in accounting.’ It’s been validation that something like this was needed. And it reminds me that we can’t look for immediate results; we must never give up too soon.”

Yancy is adamant about the importance of soft skills training to MOCA participants, especially after what she saw at that first meeting. She had passed out note cards, one yellow and one blue, and asked that the students write an academic question on one and on the other, any question at all about anything at all.

“The question that struck me the most was: ‘Is it really true that you have to look or act or dress or speak a certain way in corporate America?’ Every one of these young men were over the age of 21 and yet they clearly didn’t know the answer was ‘Yes,’” she remarks ruefully.

In the year-plus since, MOCA activities have ranged from etiquette dinners to attending the student conference for the National Association of Black Accountants (NABA) to resume preparation.

Yancy recounts: “One MOCA participant is a military veteran who, just three weeks after the NABA conference, had a job offer from a Big Four accounting firm. Guess what? This young man had top security clearance in his military career and he hadn’t even put that on his resume, didn’t think it was pertinent! There’s just so much these students need to

learn about how to present themselves and all they have to offer.”

More success stories are already pouring in from the program: MOCA students being offered internships in public accounting, students now determined to get the hours to sit for the CPA exam and more than one full-time job offer. Yancy hopes MOCA will inspire other institutions, educators and CPA societies to build similar diversity initiatives.

She muses: “Going forward, I think what I need to do is continue my involvement but create a structure to enlist even more commitment from others. MOCA won’t work as a one-person show. There’s a need and my plan is to continue to encourage young men of color to pursue careers in accounting and finance. I know what a difference it’s made for me and this is my way of paying it forward.” ■

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