

# Don't Wait...

by Jim Slaight

# Associate!

Discover why joining a minority professional organization may be the best career move you can make



**I**f you're like most college students, you've spent the past four years putting a lot of time and energy into building your intellectual strengths and rounding out your formal education. You've selected the courses appropriate to your major, studied for countless exams and written dozens of papers. In essence, you've made all the right scholastic moves. But have you been making the right career development moves as well?

### Get Involved

When Yanina Rosario, a business development manager at the Hispanic Business Initiative Fund of Greater Orlando Inc., was nearing the end of her undergraduate studies at the University of Central Florida, she met one of the leaders of the Orlando chapter of the National Society of Hispanic MBAs (NSHMBA).

"I got involved with the Orlando NSHMBA right away," she remembers. "I was asked to be the officer-at-large and volunteered to help organize the NSHMBA convention, which was being held in Orlando that year. When the local chapter held elections, I became president."

While still a college senior, Rosario began working for the Hispanic Association of AT&T Employees, where she later accepted a full-time position upon graduation. She believes her leadership experiences with NSHMBA strengthened her professional skills—skills that helped her land her first job.

"NSHMBA helps me manage my work demands," says Rosario, "and my work experience helps with my NSHMBA board activities."

### An Association for Every Interest

There are over 5,000 professional associations in the United States, hundreds of which are focused on professional development for minorities and minority-run businesses. In fact, there's probably an association dedicated to supporting the people and businesses of almost every industry or career path.

The National Association for Female Executives (NAFE), for example, is the largest professional businesswomen's association in the United States. With 125,000 members and 200 chapters, a branch of NAFE is probably closer to your campus than you may have guessed.

Melissa Wahl, executive director of NAFE, recalls her journey down the career path and how professional associations helped along the way. She began her involvement with NAFE in 1991 as an assistant editor for the organization's bimonthly publication, became the national director in 1997 and executive director last year.

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"You don't need to do it alone," says Wahl. "As a NAFE member you get a great deal of assistance with moving along your career track. We offer ongoing education, mentoring and a career center to help you find positions as you transition from school to the workplace."

Organizations such as NAFE help women feel supported, believes Marcia Rosen, NAFE member and author of *The Woman's Business Therapist*. "Young women need to know that establishing strategic alliances is essential to their success" she says. "That means more than just joining any organization; it means participating, being involved and establishing connections."

### Focusing on Minority Students

By involving yourself in professional associations, you gain access to industry-wide information that can give greater perspective to your job search and your professional future. What, then, are the benefits associated with joining a *minority-based* association?

"The National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) understands the challenges black student journalists will experience in the newspaper

industry," says Will Sutton, president of NABJ and deputy managing editor of *The News & Observer* newspaper in Raleigh, N.C. "Our focus is not only to support black journalists but also to provide them with the guidance they need to remain in the industry and succeed."

John Honaman, executive director of NSHMBA, wishes he had been able to reap the benefits of association membership when he was working toward his master's degree. "I earned my MBA in 1980 and NSHMBA was formed in 1988," explains Honaman. "Looking back, I know that NSHMBA would have aided my career journey. I would have been able to gain access to a network of peers from the Latino community and to develop my career at a much quicker pace.

"As a NSHMBA member, I would have learned from other Latino professionals who had already passed through many of the challenges I had to confront on my own."

### Giving and Receiving

Perhaps the most notable long-term benefit of association membership is the formation of a mentor relationship with a senior professional in your industry. More than offering quick advice at the proverbial office water cooler, mentors make a formal commitment to help you, the protégé, develop your skills, your industry connections and your career prospects.

"Chuck Stone, the founder of NABJ, took an unknown like me and gave me my first full-time job in 1977," says Sutton. "It was Chuck who helped guide me into my current position as a deputy managing editor and it was Chuck who swore me in as the 13th president of NABJ."

Sutton's relationship with Stone is an example of the long-term personal and professional connection that can result from association involvement. Should you choose to join an association, inquiring into their mentoring program may be the most useful question you ever ask.

### Getting Started

Finding the cross-cultural or minority-specific association that's right for you can begin with a visit to your favorite Internet search engine. Simply type in "association" or "society," along with the name of the profession or minority group that best suits your interests and background, and a list of possible choices should appear on your screen. Local chapters can then be accessed through the national Web sites of your chosen association. University career counselors and professors are also excellent sources of association information.

Another way to find the association that best meets your career interests is to talk with professionals working in your field. Sometimes called informational interviews, these informal discussions often lead to contacts within the local chapter. Informational interviews also provide you with the added benefit of real world insight into the environment, salary and career paths available in your chosen profession from an experienced veteran who has traveled the professional road you are just beginning to explore.

You may even find notices regarding the student chapters of many professional associations in your student union or posted on classroom bulletin boards.

### Next Steps

"Join an association," advises Sutton. "Work at an internship and identify mentors who can help you along your career path. Then, give back to them—give back to the association and to those who've assisted you along the way."

There is no shortcut to achieving your goals, adds Rosario. "We all have to work toward what we want," she explains. "We are given many opportunities in life; we need to take advantage of them without losing track of what we want to achieve and where we want to go." \*

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#### TENURE-TRACK POSITION • SCHOOL OF NURSING • AUGUST 2002

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