

Addressing the Lack of Black Members in the ASA

Tyrone Porter

I have been a member of the Acoustical Society of America (ASA) for more than 20 years and it is my professional home. I am also one of the few Black ASA members. Based on a demographics survey posted in 2018, 14 of the 819 responders (<2%) were Black, including me. I have been concerned for a number of years that the ASA has not done enough to address its lack of diversity. Although the meetings are personal and members are, for the most part, very approachable, this was a topic I felt uncomfortable raising in a conversation. The murder of George Floyd at the hands of four police officers has prompted me to overcome my hesitancy to discuss racial issues in acoustics and higher education with ASA members.

After video of George Floyd desperately pleading for his life went viral, Black Lives Matter protests erupted in cities across America. Companies and professional organizations, including the ASA, issued statements denouncing systemic racism and promising to dedicate resources in support of diversity and inclusion efforts (for the ASA statement, see [bit.ly/32i21Oa](https://doi.org/10.1121/AT.2020.16.4.75)).

On June 10, 2020, faculty, staff, and students at universities across the country participated in a system-wide “strike for Black lives” known as #ShutDownSTEM and #ShutDownAcademia (see www.shutdownstem.com). I invited several ASA members to join me on Zoom that day to discuss institutional racism in America, past and present, and its impact on the representation of Blacks in STEM fields. More than 20 concerned members participated in the virtual conversation, including recipients of the ASA Gold Medal, the presidents and vice presidents of the Society, and staff from ASA headquarters. I learned quickly that there was a considerable number of ASA members and leaders that were deeply troubled by the long history of violent oppression and subjugation of Blacks in America. We touched on the racial atrocities endured by Blacks for generations that has led to huge disparities

in incarceration rates, mortality rates, college degree completion, and poverty. Racial biases in the allocation of resources in secondary education, college admission decisions, and STEM teaching pedagogy have persisted for so long that Blacks have largely been excluded from STEM degrees and professions.

Recently, the National Task Force to Elevate African American representation in undergraduate physics and astronomy (TEAM-UP), which was funded by the American Institute of Physics (AIP), completed a two-year study to examine the reasons for the underrepresentation of Black students among degree recipients in physics and astronomy (see [bit.ly/3jh7dcf](https://doi.org/10.1121/AT.2020.16.4.75)). Two of the major factors identified by TEAM-UP were that Black students struggle to identify as physicists or astronomers or to find a sense of belonging due to racially insensitive and impersonal teaching methods and peer-group dynamics (also see the “Sound Perspectives” by Scott on page 77). These sentiments have been echoed by Black students enrolled in other STEM majors beyond physics. Consequently, Black undergraduate students initially enrolled in STEM degree programs change majors or abandon college completely at twice the rate of their white peers (Riegle-Crumb et al., 2019). The cumulative effect of these exclusive practices and policies enabled by institutional racism has led to a shortage of Black professionals in acoustics-related fields and consequently poor representation within the ASA. The ASA will have to enact deliberate and strategic measures to address this shortage and diversify its membership.

As an initial step, the ASA Executive Council approved the formation of the Committee to Improve Racial Diversity and Inclusivity (CIRDI) and charged the committee with proposing sustainable strategies, practices, and policies designed to encourage students of color to pursue training and degrees in acoustics-related

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disciplines, attract professionals of color to the ASA, and foster an inclusive culture and climate within ASA (also see From the President on page 8). The committee has met multiple times online and has continued the conversation that originated on June 10.

A number of exciting and impactful ideas have emerged from these discussions, such as organizing an acoustics summer school for students of color, funding summer research experiences for undergraduate students of color in acoustics-related disciplines, and hiring consultants to conduct training workshops to increase the cultural competency and awareness of ASA members and leaders. The CIRDI is in the early stages of planning, and our goal is to propose an assortment of initiatives to the ASA Executive Council that will serve as a blueprint for attracting and retaining more Black students and professionals in acoustics-related fields into the ASA. As chair of the CIRDI, I will share more about the committee and its efforts in future issues of

Acoustics Today. In the meantime, if you are interested in participating with the committee, feel free to contact me (tmp6@utexas.edu) or Vice Chair Peggy Nelson (nelson477@umn.edu). We look forward to working with ASA to move forward on an issue that is of vital importance for the Society and for our nation.

Reference

Riegle-Crumb, C., King, B., and Irizarry, Y. (2019). Does STEM stand out? Examining racial/ethnic gaps in persistence across postsecondary fields. *Educational Researcher* 48(3), 133-144. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19831006>.

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