



## PATHWAYS TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP

# GETTING THE M.B.A.

BY DONNA M. OWENS

**R**oberto Young was just a kid when he showed signs of being a budding entrepreneur.

He'd buy discounted candy and sell it at a markup. By age 11, he was accompanying his mother to work at the airport in St. Louis, Mo., assisting passengers for pay.

"I hustled the [luggage] carts, sometimes eight hours a day," recalls Young. "I always had the mindset of a businessman."

Today, Young is a first-year student at Harvard Business School, pursuing an M.B.A. He is also an engineer, with degrees in electrical and computer engineering, and an entrepreneur who owns two small businesses.

Across the country, engineers like Young are part of what could be an emerging trend: more engineers pursuing M.B.A.s, many with an eye toward business ownership. And many graduate business programs nationwide are welcoming them with open arms.

"I love to see engineers coming," says Stan Mandel, Ph.D., an executive professor at Wake Forest University's Babcock Graduate School of Management in Winston-Salem, N.C. "They have very strong analytical abilities that can be great in business."

### LEARNING THE BASICS

That theory is something that's being recognized at schools nationwide. At historically black Howard University, for instance, the engineering and business curriculums are being "synthesized" in innovative ways, thanks in part to a multimillion-dollar grant from the Kauffman Foundation that encourages students to explore entrepreneurship.

Howard has instituted what's known as "entrepreneurial boot camp," for incoming freshmen university-wide. This is a series of courses and modules that introduces them to the basics of owning and running a successful business.

"Engineers are people who are creative," notes James H. Johnson Jr.,

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 — Roberto Young, Harvard Business School

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Ph.D., dean of Howard’s College of Engineering, Architecture and Computer Sciences. “When that’s merged with entrepreneurship, it creates new opportunities.”

**THE ‘NEXT LEVEL’**

Young, the one-time kiddie capitalist, is a prime example of an engineer who’s long had a penchant for business, too.

After graduating *magna cum laude* from the University of Memphis then going to work for a major aerospace company, he made a decision.

“I enjoyed engineering...seeing technology in action and solving problems,” he says. “But I realized that I wanted to take my business experience to the next level and get an M.B.A.”

At Harvard, Young is taking courses such as finance, marketing and leadership. Already, he owns a small real estate management firm, several properties and an office cleaning service.

As for the future, he plans to gain additional experience in the corporate arena, then launch a family-owned business. His ultimate goal is to become a real estate mogul.

**THINKING AHEAD**

Damaune Journey, an engineer and former NSBE national chair, also opted for business school after working for a few years. After graduating from the University of Michigan with an industrial engineering degree, he landed a position



New England Patriots VP Rena Clark (top) and NSBE member Damaune Journey of Eli Lilly saw their career options expand after getting M.B.A.s from Harvard.

with pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly and Company in Indianapolis. His career was progressing well enough, but Journey quickly surmised he’d need additional credentials to reach the top.

“I always had a dream to go to business school, but it became a concern

for me when, one, it became clear that I didn’t have an impact on the larger business and organization,” he recalls. “And two, that even if given the opportunity, I didn’t have the experience.”

Once Journey was accepted at Harvard, he took a two-year educational leave from Lilly; the company paid his tuition and fees.

“I loved it,” he says of business school, where he designed his own curriculum in general management.

After graduating in 2005, Journey returned to Lilly and now is a manufacturing team leader in charge of 30 employees. But he’s thinking ahead to future business ventures, both individual and collaborative projects. They range from building resorts in Africa to someday being CEO of his own company.

**PLANNING FOR CHANGE**

Alton J. King, a civil engineer and 2006 M.B.A. candidate at Wake Forest, has dreamed of being a CEO since he was a kid reading his big brother’s *Fortune* magazines.

He graduated from North Carolina State University then worked for a Chicago marine construction firm for about seven years before deciding to go back to school.

After some initial fear about re-entering academia, he’s now glad he made the choice. Besides classroom learning, he and other students recently traveled to Asia, visiting such business sites as the Hong Kong stock exchange.

King hopes to use his engineering background and business training to launch a health care concern. Its focus would be on “improving medical facilities, how patient data is accumulated and stored, and minimizing cost,” he says. “I want to be a change agent for our health care system.”

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At Wake Forest U: IAAB Class of 2004 (above) received an innovative introduction to business. Current M.B.A. student Ijeoma Okpukpara (at right) is considering launching a global company.

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Fellow Wake Forest classmate Ijeoma “Ije” Okpukpara, an industrial engineer educated at Georgia Tech, also spent a few years working as a consultant before business school beckoned.

Slated to graduate this spring, the 25-year-old has already been offered — and plans to accept — a plum position with a major bank in New York City.

But Okpukpara is also brainstorming about her future. The Nigerian native, whose family came to America when she was 14, hopes to devise a future business plan that will incorporate her international, tech and business backgrounds.

“I’m not yet sure, but I will probably be looking at ideas that have something to do with globalization,” she says.

**MYRIAD OPPORTUNITIES**

Possibilities abound for engineers to merge their specific discipline with an advanced business degree, says Rena Clark, a mechanical engineer, Harvard M.B.A. and entrepreneur, who’s now vice president of Community Affairs



and Corporate Philanthropy for the New England Patriots.

Clark is living proof of how an engineering path can lead to myriad professional opportunities: Her experience includes working for major companies such as General Electric and serving as director of MBA Program Administration and COO at Harvard. Along the way, she’s also acquired, built and operated two middle market-sized manufacturing companies, later sold at a profit.

Her advice to budding entrepreneurs is fairly simple: Build relationships, and don’t shy away from a path that may seem circuitous.

“You have to remain open to whatever may happen,” she says. ■

*Donna M. Owens is an award-winning journalist who lives in Baltimore.*

**Building a Pipeline for Black M.B.A.s**

**HARVARD UNIVERSITY**

<http://www.hbs.edu/mba/studentlife/diversity.html>

Diversity among the student body is a foundation of the Harvard Business School experience — both inside and outside the classroom. HBS encourages candidates from all minority groups to apply. To further enhance the diversity of its community, there are events on campus geared toward prospective minority students and several student organizations that celebrate the diversity of the campus.

**HOWARD UNIVERSITY**

Business

<http://www.bs.school.howard.edu>

Engineering

<http://www.howard.edu/ceacs>

Founded in 1970, the School of Business of historically black Howard University has produced more than 1,200 M.B.A. graduates prepared to meet the challenges of the global business environment. The program, first in Washington, D.C., to be accredited by the AACSB-International Association for Management Education, was ranked among the top 67 in the U.S. by *BusinessWeek* magazine in 2000.

Howard’s is one of the 10 ABET-accredited engineering programs at historically black schools in the U.S., which collectively produce more than one-third of black engineering degree-holders each year.

**WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY**

IAAB

[www.mba.wfu.edu/iaab](http://www.mba.wfu.edu/iaab)

(336)758-5422

MBA Admissions

866-WAKEMBA

[admissions@mba.wfu.edu](mailto:admissions@mba.wfu.edu)

Wake Forest University’s “It’s All About Business” program introduces business concepts to African-American and other minority undergrads. IAAB hosts juniors and seniors for three weeks in summer, preparing them for the transition from college to the business environment. Wake Forest faculty members and guest lecturers teach participants the fundamentals of accounting, finance, computing and statistical skills, marketing and economics; they’re also introduced to entrepreneurship and information technology and take regular field trips. The program features various educational activities during the day, such as dance, psychology, chemistry, music, French and biology. Full scholarships are available.