MINORITIES IN MARINE AFFAIRS

James H. Hannaham

Chief of Naval Operations, Naval Oceanography Division (OP-952)

Abstract

The author, a minority of Afro-American descent shares insights based on his experiences in devising successful intervention strategies within a majority professional association. The results could be applicable to others in similar situations who may wish to leverage their ability to influence positive organizational responses to problems and issues related to minority involvement and access within the profession.

1. Introduction

My first casual involvement with the newly organized National Marine Education Association (NMEA) back in 1979 has since proved to be an important milestone along a path spanning more than two decades of personal and professional activities promoting improved access for minorities in national marine affairs. The NMEA annual conference at the University of Delaware that year introduced me to an alert and sensitive group of marine educators from all levels who together with colleagues from government and private institutions were united in their total dedication to bringing about greater marine awareness in the national education system.

A number of individuals I had not known before were beyond the state of routinely acknowledging the sad state of affairs regarding minority representation in the marine professions. They were engaged in innovative actions to identify opportunities and to resolve problems where they encountered them within their immediate working environment. Being virtually the only person of color had some important advantages. For example, I could capitalize on my high visibility and the ensuing curiosity which brought more people to me than I might have met otherwise, thus, facilitating my assessment of the organization and its behavior for clues on how best to design approaches relating to minority interests.

2. Discussion

Building on this core group of individuals the following year at the association's 1980 annual conference at the University of Wisconsin, I organized a panel discussion on 'Minorities and Women in the Marine Sciences and Ocean Engineering'. A Working Paper resulting from these discussions provided a good overview of the issues involved, brought together a wealth of ideas from several perspectives and identified an informal network of about 100 individuals who began to share information and plan intersessional activities between the annual meetings of the association.

During this period I became a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of CURRENT the journal of NMEA. The network of interest in issues relating to minorities and women had expanded to include the elected officers of the NMEA, chairpersons of some of its standing committees as well as the editor of the journal. Subsequent issues of CURRENT contained articles on the results of successful university based marine programs bridging into adjacent urban communities in southern California and the life of Richard Etheridge who headed an all black life saving Coast Guard Station operating off the coast of North Carolina from 1880 to 1949.

The pre-conference sessions of the NMEA Executive Board at Salem State College in 1980 provided an excellent opportunity to formalize the activities of NMEA relating to minority affairs. My proposal to establish
an official standing committee in NMEA was approved as were other recommendations such as one that brought NMEA and Navy into partnership to encourage greater national education support for marine project entries in the Navy Science Fair Program.

The charter of the NMEA Committee on Minorities and Women is, "To encourage minorities and women to enter marine fields and to increase professional participation and recognition of minorities and women in the marine professions". I agreed to serve as Co-chairperson with Dr. Mildred Graham of Georgia State University.

The NMEA Committee on Minorities and Women has no operating funds. Committee activities thus far have focused on the convening of a major presentation at the NMEA annual conferences. A workshop was held during the 1981 conference at Texas A&M University in Galveston. Another workshop will be held during the 1982 annual conference at the University of California, San Diego. Other intersessional Committee activities have included expanding and reinforcing linkages with similar interests in sister organizations such as the American Geological Institute (AGI) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). A significant linkage has been established between Committee members and Mathematics, Engineers, Science and Health, a Network of Minority Professional Associations (MESHWORK) which is essentially a mutual self help national collective effort to increase and enhance the participation of minorities in science related fields. MESHWORK is sponsored by the Office of Opportunities in Science of the AAAS.

A significant effort by the NMEA official family which has been in preparation for the past two years is a special issue of CURRENT focusing on past contributions, present activities and future prospects for minorities in marine affairs. Publication of this special issue is planned in August 1982. I am guest editor of the special issue which will be the first comprehensive look at the status of minorities in the marine sector from several perspectives in articles and features prepared by a distinguished group of scholars, scientists and administrators. There will be special features on minority role models in the maritime professions and a National Resource Directory containing individual and organizational contacts for career guidance and a current bibliography of relevant publications. It is hoped that this special issue of CURRENT will go far to fill the void in knowledge about this important subject and stimulate greater minority interest in the marine professions.

3. Conclusions

The foregoing description of an evolving program of positive activities relating to minority awareness in NMEA suggests some themes which may be orchestrated to good effect in other professional organizations—marine related or otherwise.

* Minority (women) professionals associated with majority organizations must not hesitate to use their often unique potential to inform and advise from both a professional and a minority (female) perspective.

* Minority (women) professionals should look beyond race, sex or ethnicity as the only or pre-dominate reason hindering advancement. Do your homework on the organization and its roots, its politics and people. Be patient, thorough and persistent in preparing your case and in building those coalitions in support of your objectives. You may be pleasantly surprised to learn that your goals are shared by others who have been pursuing them in quiet isolation.

* Remember that you must give something if you expect to receive something. Be generous of your time and talents in support of the organization’s interests and activities. To make demands of the organization however well founded, without proper payment of these dues will likely lead to personal frustration and worse, failure to reach your objectives.

* Your high degree of visibility as a minority or woman can work to your advantage. Don’t knock it. Cultivate it.
Notes


