

Stepping Up to Take Action

By Stacy Chandler

A lot of people are talking about diversity and inclusion within the accounting profession, but a new group of CPAs have stepped up to help take action.

The AICPA's Inclusion Champions program asks its volunteers to take the message of diversity and inclusion as far and wide as possible throughout the profession. It's not just lofty talk — the aim is meaningful action, here and now, that will bring a wider range of people, backgrounds, and ideas into accounting and ensure success once they get there. Through speaking engagements, blog posts, and other activities, the Inclusion Champions are setting out to help CPAs make a real difference right where they are.

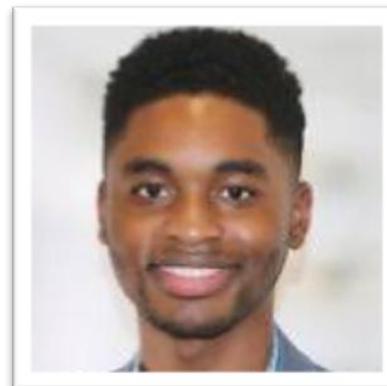
Here's a look at the seven 2018-2019 Inclusion Champions, including their backgrounds, their experiences, and their goals for 18 months of service in the program.



Rebekah Brown, CPA, Director of Development, Maryland Association of CPAs, The Business Learning Institute

Earlier in her career, Brown had to sort out the difference between skills and strengths. She was unhappy in a job that used her skills, but not her strengths, and found the courage to move toward what she knew she could contribute to the accounting profession. She recalls getting an email from a student who nearly abandoned plans to major in accounting but found encouragement in Brown's story. As an Inclusion Champion, Brown hopes to learn from the other Champions and encourage more young people — particularly women — to enter the profession. That's where some progress in diversity has

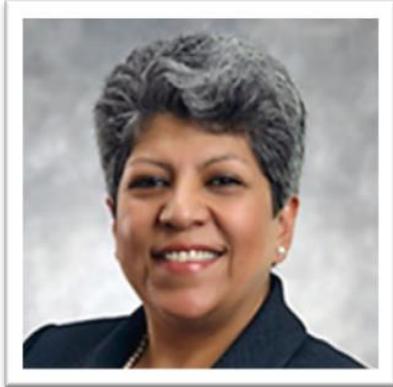
already been made, she says: "I am not sure that I would have believed you if you told me when I entered the profession that three of the Big Four would be led by women in 2018." But she also cites the low number of African American CPAs who are leaders in their firm and hopes to help "move the needle in the right direction."



Jerome Fulton Jr., CPA, Consultant, Deloitte

Fulton wanted to become an Inclusion Champion "because I want the accounting profession to reflect the world in which we live." He hopes to use his time with the program to encourage people to pursue the CPA designation, which he calls his own greatest career accomplishment, and to spread the message and means for increasing diversity in the profession. He's also likely to steer his listeners toward speaking up for themselves. "The greatest professional lesson that I've learned as a result of being in the accounting profession is that I am responsible for driving my career, and I must be my biggest advocate," he says.

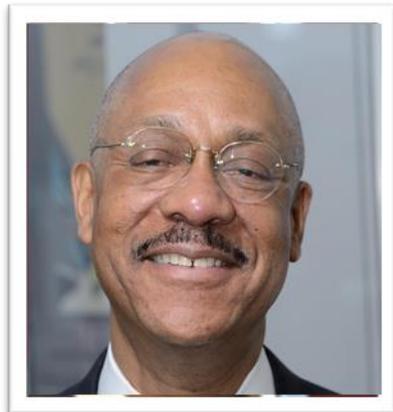
"It's easy to fade into the background when you work for a large company. The onus is on you to stand out and make sure you are getting the opportunities you need to grow."



Jenny Herrera, CPA, CGMA, Partner, Citrin Cooperman

Throughout her accounting career, which has included serving as president of the Greater Washington Society of CPAs, AICPA Council, and more, Herrera has sought balance both in her personal experience and in the profession. She's seen that soft skills are just as important as technical skills in the workplace, that community involvement needs a place at the table along with work and family, and that diversity and especially inclusion play a role in an organization's success. "When individuals from all ethnicities and genders are given equal opportunities, the accounting profession flourishes in more ways than one," she says. "This passion carries me through my day-to-day life. The

profession has been very generous to me by providing with countless opportunities. I want to make sure others have the same opportunities."



J. Michael Kirkland, CPA, CGMA, JMK Consulting

Not long after passing the CPA Exam, Kirkland embarked on an overseas assignment to London. It was slated for three years, but stretched to nine, taking him and his family "to places I never dreamed we could go." The experience cemented his desire to help other accountants find success and fulfillment in the field. As an Inclusion Champion, he says he looks forward to speaking with students and their parents, and he also wants to make sure that small and midsize firms understand the economic benefits to seeking and supporting diversity on their staff. To measure the profession's success in its diversity efforts, he suggests looking at the numbers of minority managers and partners in firms of every size. The biggest

lesson he's learned from accounting, he says, is "Don't be afraid to seek new opportunities." It's a lesson that has paid dividends for him, and that helps inform his approach to broadening diversity in the profession.



Richard Levychin, CPA, CGMA, Partner, Galleros Robinson

As a young man, Levychin, an immigrant from Jamaica, decided to pursue a career in accounting because he "wasn't interested in doing the starving artist thing," he said in a career guide at AccountingDegree.com. Now he helps make companies successful, and that includes helping to build a pipeline of accounting professionals from diverse backgrounds and with the technical and soft skills they need to succeed. Levychin, who received an Arthur Ashe Leadership Award in 2016, was a founding member of the AICPA's National Diversity and Inclusion Commission and has written for several publications, including Journal of Accountancy, Business Insider, Black Enterprise, and AARP.



Kecia Smith, Ph.D., CPA, Assistant Professor, Virginia Tech
Smith considers herself “a living example” of how diversity programs in accounting can benefit people as well as the profession. As a student at North Carolina A&T State University, her education was aided by the AICPA Scholarship Award for Minority Accounting Students, and she wrote a research paper on African Americans in accounting and the effect of the 150-hour rule. From there, she entered public accounting and now teaches the next generation of accountants. She’s encouraged by active programs in the profession to increase and support diversity, including the AICPA National Commission on Diversity & Inclusion, the

Accounting Scholars Leadership Workshop, and the Pipeline Symposium, but recognizes that there is more work to be done as statistics show stagnation. Helping young people see themselves in the accounting profession is key, she says, as is taking the message of diversity to as many working professionals as possible. “If I can start one person thinking critically about diversity and inclusion and how to be an advocate,” she told us, “I think that would be most rewarding.”



Ralph Thomas, CGMA, CEO, New Jersey Society of CPAs
Thomas is blunt about both his greatest professional accomplishment, passing the CPA Exam, and his hardest professional lesson: “that I needed to work harder than my majority peers to prove that I belonged.” He wanted to be an Inclusion Champion to help people understand that diversity and inclusion are more than just the right thing to do in the profession. Such efforts are, he says, “a business imperative.” By the end of his 18-month tenure in the program, he says “My hope is that the diversity and inclusion initiative will have made significant progress such that it will be woven into the fabric of our culture and the world.”

For more information on the AICPA’s Inclusion Champions program or to request a speaker, please visit aicpa.org/inclusionchampions