

Black MBA group's CEO focuses on mentoring

May 10, 2004 — By Bob Tita

BARBARA THOMAS figures she can boost membership in the National Black MBA Assn. by helping African-Americans climb the corporate ladder.

The new president and CEO of the Chicago-based professional group aims to triple membership to 18,000 by the end of the year. To attract new members, she's launching an executive training program later this month to help blacks reach mid- and upper-level management positions in corporations or start their own businesses.

"Companies are bringing them in and they're not moving up the ranks as quickly as they should," says Ms. THOMAS.

As an incentive to join the association, members get a \$100 discount on the \$249 fee for the three-month program. Both members and non-members will pay \$50 an hour for counseling sessions at the association's annual conference in September.

Participants will receive self-assessment profiles to identify strengths and weaknesses in their management skills. Executive coaches paid by the association will then help them devise career strategies in counseling sessions over the telephone or online. After the three-month program, participants can opt for additional counseling sessions — in person, on the phone or via e-mail — at \$150 an hour.

Ms. THOMAS won't disclose the cost of the program or the number of executive coaches participating. No goal has been set for the number of promotions attributed to the executive coaching. But Ms. THOMAS says the program will be capable of counseling 2,500 people annually.

Nearly 10,000 African-Americans earn MBAs annually, a figure that's remained steady in recent years, according to the association. Founded by University of Chicago business students and faculty in 1970, the association primarily has focused on helping African-Americans get into business schools and on improving corporate recruitment once they graduate.

But once black executives are on the job, a lack of mentors can impede their advancement, says Donald Shannon, a professor at Chicago's DePaul University who has been involved in recruiting members of minority groups for accounting careers.

"Networking is not a strong suit in the African-American community," Mr. Shannon says. "It does get done, but it's not as powerful a model as it is in other communities."

Ms. THOMAS, 55, has an undergraduate degree from New York's Bernard Baruch College and an MBA from Columbia University. She's a former director of finance and administration for CBS Radio. After leaving the network in 1989, she served as a chief financial officer for health care organizations and other non-profit

groups, including two years for the MBA association. The board of directors appointed her interim president last fall, after the resignation of Jacqueline Adams, a former CBS News correspondent.

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