

MLT PERSPECTIVES:

Voices from the Front Lines on Career Choice and Development of Underrepresented Minorities

IN SPRING 2017, Management Leadership for Tomorrow (MLT) set out to describe and document how professional networks have influenced the career choice and development of MLT's Rising Leader "alumni" - Black and Hispanic professionals who had completed at least one of MLT's rigorous career development programs. A dozen in-depth interviews were conducted with men and women of color who work in varied corporate sectors, including Finance, Consulting, Retailing, Consumer Goods and Tech.

FOUR KEY THEMES EMERGED:

- 1 THE BIG THREE - HARD SKILLS, SOFT SKILLS, AND COMMUNITY:**
Those interviewed consistently said that among the most crucial resources for their career development -- as important as key hard and soft skills -- has been a surrounding community of professional peers and mentors. Their career success has depended not just on knowing what to do and how to do it, but on believing they could and should do it and that they wouldn't be doing it alone.
- 2 CONFIDENCE IS IMPORTANT FOR EVERYONE BUT ESPECIALLY HARD TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN FOR UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITIES (URMS):**
Without a group of like-minded role-models, few if any of these individuals believe they would have the necessary awareness, confidence, sense of belonging, and fortitude necessary for their successful career choice and navigation. Such motivations and emotional support may not be unique for diverse men and women, but a network like MLT's appears to be more necessary for underrepresented minorities than for non-minority college graduates.
- 3 SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATIONS MATCH INVESTMENTS IN INDIVIDUALS WITH COMMUNITY AND NETWORKING BUILDING INVESTMENTS:**
Companies can play a huge role in making the development of internal networks less haphazard and more deliberate for URMs; the cultivation of inter-organization peer and near-peer (individuals one or two steps ahead in that company's career ladder) networks and relationships strengthen recruitment, retention and development of diverse talent.
- 4 COMPANY AND PRODUCT STRATEGY CAN BENEFIT FROM RESOURCE GROUPS:**
Diverse resource groups and networks within companies can serve as important sources for business innovation and opportunities to reach underserved markets, not just as support communities for their underrepresented minority employees.

HOW MARCO POLO ONCE DESCRIBED A BRIDGE TO KUBLAI KHAN, STONE BY STONE...

"But which is the stone that supports the bridge?" Kublai Khan asks.

"The bridge is not supported by one stone or another," Marco answers, "but by the line of the arch that they form."

Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: "Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me."

Polo answers: "Without stones there is no arch."

(Calvino, 1972: 74)

Calvino, I. 1972. *Le città invisibili* [Invisible cities]. Torino, Italy: Einaudi.

While there is an extensive body of analytic knowledge regarding the significance of networks on career choice and development (See Sidebar p. 12), MLT sought to bring the data to life through the actual stories of diverse men and women in the MLT community. This qualitative approach enables a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and impact in ways that go beyond statistics and data on minority participation in the workplace. Their interviews reveal how contacts, connections and friendships contribute to career self-confidence, sense of belonging, aspirations and motivations. The findings, while qualitative and directional in nature, will hopefully help inform efforts at companies and organizations committed to advancing diverse leadership within their organizations.

1 THE SPECIAL IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES FOR UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITIES

WHILE COMMUNITY AND PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE in anyone's career success, these networks traditionally have been poorly developed or non-existent for many people of color and especially those pursuing business careers. MLT was founded to help provide the key ingredients necessary for career success typically not taught in the classroom and provide access to critical milestone positions in one's career (e.g., first internship in college or first job). Along the way it created a community of like-minded and equally motivated peers and mentors of color that has played an important role in advancing individual and collective career success. Those interviewed confirmed that the MLT community was a unique source of support as they launched or accelerated their nascent careers.

“Over the course of 18 months, the biggest benefit I got was just the sheer amount of support from my MLT cohort. You come in and everyone's the cream of the crop. You realize everyone is good, but we're all trying to achieve one particular goal and we all have our own struggles. For me, as well as a number of other people I talked to, we were struggling mightily with the GMAT. I went from “I don't care, I'm giving up” to...moving forward...I ended up getting into all six of the schools that I applied to those people around to push me when I'm not feeling my best...was absolutely critical to my success.”

The “secret sauce” of MLT was not just coaching and events but the unique filter MLT applied to its cohorts in terms of identifying high potential candidates with similar career goals and experiences.

One's peers and “near-peers” - those who may be a few rungs higher on the academic or career ladders - influence one's opportunities and choices - both those they opt to pursue and those they do not. Peers and near-peers provide valuable insights about school and career paths and what it takes to succeed on those paths. They help to close the information and exposure gap that many minorities experience regarding professional careers in many sectors that may be less familiar to them.¹

“Up until my participation in [MLT], I was smart, did well in school and got into University of Georgia...Most people I knew in high school didn't go to college...MLT really gave me my first exposure to a group of accomplished minorities. They were from some really esteemed schools like Harvard and Stanford...Places where I have never met people from before. I remember feeling very intimidated. What MLT did was put me in the room with those people and show me that I was just like a lot of these other people...MLT essentially took that stigma away.”

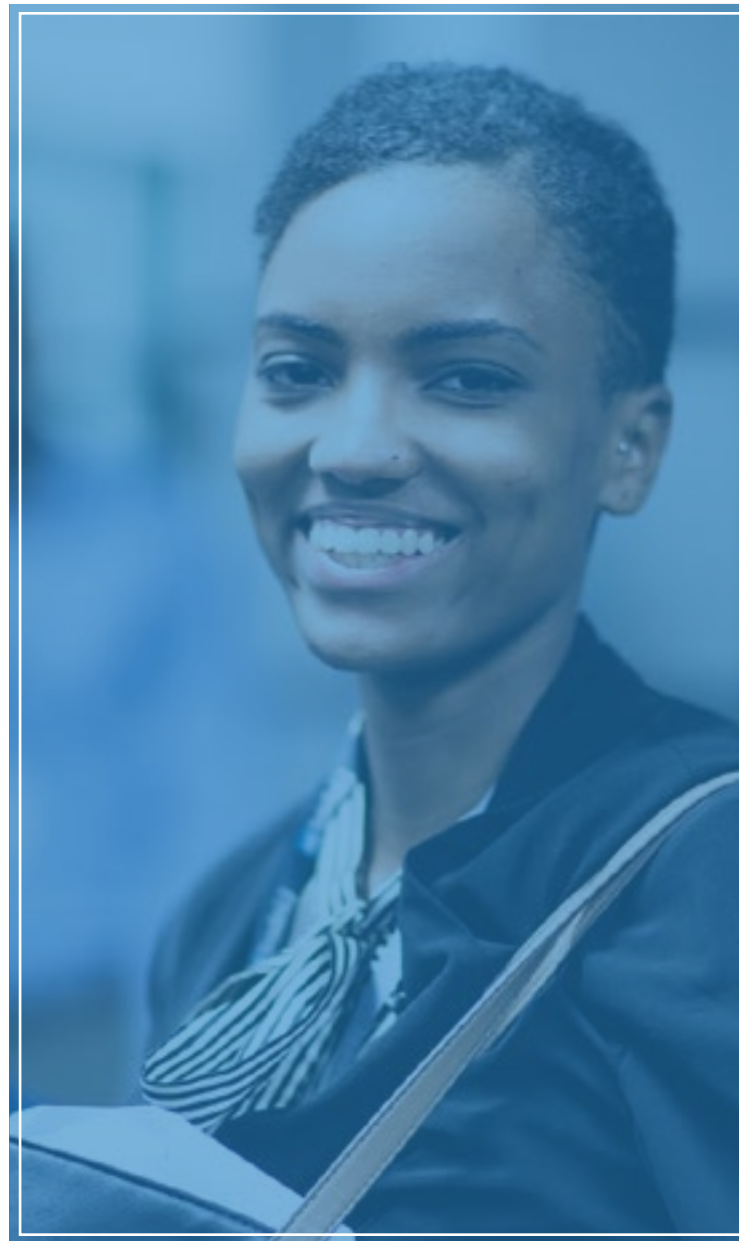
¹ This information gap, specifically a lack of information about tech careers is preventing many talented minorities from pursuing careers in the tech sector, emerged as a key impediment for many minority students in a survey of over 900 Black, Latino and Native American early- to mid-career professionals that served as the focus for the March 2017 MLT Perspectives: Information Gap, Not Pipeline, Behind Low Diversity Numbers in Tech (<https://ml4t.org/insights/information-gap-not-pipeline-behind-low-diversity-number-tech/>)

1 THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES (CONTINUED)

Many Rising Leaders said that the bonds formed with peers during the MLT experience were stronger than any other group of which they had been a part. While most had been in other groups that, like MLT, were made up of individuals around their same age and ethnicity, what distinguished the MLT network was that it was their first time in a group with similarly accomplished peers who shared similarly ambitious goals. Moreover, through the MLT experience, they had to work together to achieve team and personal objectives, and equally important, to overcome adversity and setbacks.

"We all just really leveraged each other because we all had that same end goal. You get through the 18 months of the program and you've come a long way. You've been broken down, but you've come so far and gotten into school. I think the bonds you form during that process are really meaningful even to this day."

"It's difficult to quit when there's an army of people marching alongside you. When you fall, your fellow soldier picks you up and, sometimes even carry you through the battlefield to the victory line...As a member of this great program, I have never felt alone...One of my best friends in the program has taught me to take risks and dream big. Not only has this person been an encourager, but he also believes in me so much that I'm afraid to let him down...They keep you accountable. They uplift, encourage, and celebrate you. They are your support system, comic relief, and voice of reason."



2 PERSONAL MOTIVATION AND ATTITUDES PLAY A LARGE ROLE IN CAREER CHOICE AND DEVELOPMENT, ESPECIALLY FOR URMS

CONSISTENT WITH ANOTHER RECENT MLT PERSPECTIVES WHITE PAPER, “Minority Student Confidence in the Tech Sector,” those interviewed confirmed that knowing a minority who has been successful in a given career path, made them more confident that they could succeed in that path.² In short, knowing others is a key indicator of whether individuals will choose to pursue a given career path.

“During my first year at the company I met a guy who was two years older than me...We both came from HBCUs. We were working together and one day he told me he was leaving the company and going to business school...He said he got into Harvard, Chicago, and Wharton. I was floored; I was like ‘they let black people into these programs?’ In my mind, I was like, I guess it’s possible, but I had never met anyone who had gone to these schools.”



These peer networks can help raise aspirations and increase the sense of confidence that one can succeed in a given path. MLT heard this from many people and especially those who were first-generation college graduates.

“I was the first in my family to go to college...Just being around [MLT Fellows who] want to work at impressive companies and are not afraid to move all across the US really opened my eyes... I never considered working at a [a leading Silicon Valley tech company] until I got into MLT. And it wasn’t just that MLT gave me the chance to interview there, but I could really see myself working there because the folks I was around just didn’t have the same fears that I have...You just get pushed further when you have folks like that...I’m around folks who have very high aspirations and that affected me.”

¹ See MLT Perspectives: “Minority Student Confidence in the Tech Sector” <https://ml4t.org/insights/mlt-perspectives-white-paper/>

2 PERSONAL MOTIVATION AND ATTITUDES (CONTINUED)

Many spoke about how surprising and validating it was to be among others who “look like me.” Many had become accustomed to being the “first or only” minority in their academic or work settings, so the MLT community has provided an important counterpoint.

“I’ve always been alone - I was the only Black person in my major...I was the only minority in the [Silicon Valley] office at [my first job with a tech company]. People used to think I was the receptionist. They used to ask for the wifi password.”

“We were tight because there were only eight people of color [and though not all were MLTers] we were a band of brothers and a sister - we trained together, we went to lunch together...”

“MLT was most transformational for me. It was the first time I had friends of color. At Cornell, I wasn’t Hispanic enough for the Hispanic group. But at MLT, I saw role models that looked like me and were accessible to me. I wish I had MLT when I was younger.”



2 PERSONAL MOTIVATION AND ATTITUDES (CONTINUED)

Intercompany peer and near-peer relationships provide guidance, perspective, and support that prove valuable to minorities as they navigate their careers. The friendship, camaraderie, commiseration and support such relationships provide adds to job satisfaction and commitment to the organization. MLT Rising Leaders spoke about challenges they have faced in environments where they did not have strong peer connections and how having those relationships contributes to their confidence, sense of belonging, and commitment to the organization.

"In banking the first few years are critical...You need someone in these firms to be your go-to person...it can be hard to find those people who are one-to-two levels above who you can form a relationship with and who will be there to help you."

MLT does a great job of making you feel like you're part of a tribe. You need people to support you. I could call [MLT Rising Leaders] to talk about stress - I used it a lot."

"I came to Atlanta (for my first job after college) and [the company] had a fair-sized Florida A&M network, but most were in [another, less prestigious, part of the company]. When I came in I was kind of on an island and there just weren't a lot of minorities. So I was used to just being on my own and I was resourceful enough to figure out how to leverage the people and the resources around me to the best of our mutual benefit, but I had to put in a lot of work on my own. [After MLT, I went into brand management at an MLT partner company], where it was dramatically different... I knew there were people I could check in with...people that I would want to hang out with in a new city...I'm coming in with a team around me and we're able to sharpen each other's skills."

Unfortunately, many of the challenges associated with lack of a peer community only become more pressing as individuals get more senior. This is also the time when these individuals are the most valuable to an organization's diversity efforts.

"As the most senior Black person at [my company], there aren't a lot of people to talk to. It definitely makes a difference to have a seat at the table with [decision makers]. People just don't get diversity issues and miss easy stuff all the time... At least now that I have seat at the table; I can influence these things. Before that, we would just miss."

3 RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF INDIVIDUAL DIVERSE TALENT IS INHERENTLY LINKED TO ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR NETWORKING AND COMMUNITY BUILDING AMONG URMS

ORGANIZATIONS ARE NOT JUST STRUGGLING TO ATTRACT AND RECRUIT MORE DIVERSE TALENT, but also to retain and advance the minority talent they have within the organization. Relationships can play a key role in employee recruitment, retention, satisfaction and success - especially for minority employees. We see opportunities for companies to tap into these networks - formal and informal - to help drive their business goals and create environments where diverse talent thrives.

MLT has come to recognize the importance of peers and near-peers to the recruiting process via its engagement with hundreds of alumni who are early-career professionals and have gone through a career transition. These alum consistently rate the most influential people with whom they engaged were individuals in similar roles or one-two levels ahead of the role they were offered, followed by their future manager, senior executives and then recruiters.

"The whole reason I came to [my company] in the first place was [an MLT Rising Leader], who I met at an MLT presentation...When I came for my internship, I knew I was going to have [the Rising Leader] here looking out for me, and he did."

"The goal [for companies] to strive for is the peer pressure effect, for lack of a better term. Where once you get one person interested, that turns to two and then two turns to four and then you've got some momentum. The way you do that is to have really good people that are at roughly that same level, who aren't that far removed from what people are going through and can still relate and make the connection."

3 RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND DEVELOPMENT (CONTINUED)

“Going through [recruiting] can be very intimidating, but [MLT] just kind of takes all the fear away... When you walk into the room there are fewer strangers because there are people you already know and it’s kind of like a cheat...Instead of coming in thinking that we’re all in competition, you come in thinking that we’re all going to help each other.”

“Diversity efforts at [the company I ended up working for] were basically being led by just [two MLT Rising Leaders]...For full-time, out of the class of 40 MBAs, they had probably 11 minorities - which was probably the most they’ve ever had. Of those 11, I think 7 were MLT...”

The quote above shows how just a few passionate individuals can significantly advance an organization’s diversity recruiting efforts. While many MLT Rising Leaders are active recruiters for their companies, particularly within the MLT community, some express frustration that their recruiting efforts are not recognized or rewarded by their organizations. Spending time recruiting on behalf of the organization necessarily takes time and energy away from other job functions. But if contributing to the organization’s diverse recruitment success is not recognized and rewarded in the same way as other contributions, then not only will minorities feel that the organization is not appropriately prioritizing diversity - which can be harmful when organizations do not live up to their public pronouncements about the importance of diversity - but it also forces talented minority employees to choose between contributing to diversity recruiting, which they are often personally passionate about, or spending time on other activities that are more likely to help them advance in their careers. Companies would be wise to recognize and end these zero-sum games that put their minority talent in uncomfortable and untenable positions.



4 EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS ARE NOT JUST FOR EMPLOYEES

WHILE MANY ORGANIZATIONS HAVE EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS (ERGS) OR OTHER AFFINITY NETWORKS, those interviewed felt few leveraged them to their fullest potential. As noted above, many will facilitate the formation and periodic gathering of the networks, but do little to cultivate and sustain relationship-building within the groups beyond social events and cultural celebrations. While these are worthwhile activities that benefit employees and organizational culture, organizations may be missing larger opportunities to channel the power of these diverse networks into addressing core business needs and innovating to serve communities represented by their diverse talent.

One great example of an MLT partner company doing just this emerged in an interview with Erby L. Foster, Jr., former Director, Diversity & Inclusion at The Clorox Company³:

You have said that “diversity drives innovation” at Clorox. Could you tell us more?

If we only recruit at the same few MBA schools, we are going to end up hiring the same kinds of people. And that will only lead to consensus – not break-through thinking and innovation. We value diversity of thought, experience, and worldviews. We want people who understand consumers and whose insights will help us grow global markets. That’s why giving people exposure to MLT’s CAP training earlier in their careers is so helpful.

How have Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) factored into Clorox’s business impact?

Several successful product launches originated with our ERGs. Colleagues in our Latino ERG identified a new business opportunity for Latino Millennials who crave home-cooked meals but don’t have the time or recipes to prepare them. Our team created the business plan and strategy that led to the acquisition of Nueva Cocina®, a packet of ingredients that creates a delicious Latino meal. It became the winning idea for the company’s innovation contest. Nueva Cocina® now includes nine new products developed in less than one year. That speaks volumes about the value that a culture of inclusion brings to business.

Proof of your point that diversity drives innovation. What makes the relationship with MLT successful?

My background is in finance and accounting, so I look at diversity as a business – and our ERGs as strategic business units. I see how diversity is moving the needle in our company. MLT has the unique vantage point of seeing diversity in action across the private and social sectors. They are big picture people. And they share many of the same values as Clorox. We believe in stretching for results, doing the right thing, taking personal ownership, and working together to win. When partners share the same core values, great things happen – for our people, our organizations, our communities, and our country.

The lesson for other companies is that by tapping into ERGs as strategic business units, not only can companies drive business results and reach new markets, but the dynamic also fosters closer and more meaningful relationships among ERG members. Indeed, the strategic use of diversity and inclusion efforts are much more likely to be necessities, not “nice-to-haves” for successful companies operating in global and regional markets where their customers and clients are rarely, if ever, homogeneous in customs, preferences, and needs.

³ <https://ml4t.org/blog/mlt-partner-spotlight-how-clorox-is-building-a-diverse-talent-pipeline/>



WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT THE MLT NETWORK?

MLT WAS FOUNDED IN 2002 to transform the careers and lives of talented Black, Hispanic, and Native American women and men by helping them achieve their full leadership potential. MLT has worked with over 6,000 individuals over the past 15 years (50% of whom are women) and welcomes approximately 1000 new MLTers into one of MLT's programs each year.

A core part of MLT's success is due to the thriving Alumni / Rising Leaders network and the advancement of these Rising Leaders into the leadership ranks at global companies and non-profits spanning every major sector of the economy. Over half of MLT Alumni are leading teams and making hiring decisions at firms including Google, Citi, Deloitte, P&G, Goldman Sachs, PepsiCo and Booz Allen Hamilton. Still others are leaders on top graduate school campuses around the country.

MLT Fellows enter the community via one of MLT's four core programs, which are aligned to support professionals at key career transition points (college-to-career, early career-to-graduate school, grad school-to-professional, and manager-to-leader). MLT works with Fellows to help them successfully navigate these transitions and get on the fast track to an accelerated career trajectory. As part of the 12-18 month program experience, Fellows gain clarity around their career goals, a deeper understanding of "the bar" for success on their chosen career path, where they stand relative to that bar today, and what they need to do to close any gaps. Fellows are matched with an experienced MLT coach - who provides perspective, support and accountability - and are also integrated into the MLT community; this network is an imperative part of their ongoing MLT experience. Many years later, MLTers still look to those they met in MLT for advice, support, and camaraderie.

Completing an MLT program is just the beginning of a life-long relationship for MLT Fellows. MLT calls its Alumni "Rising Leaders" because of its intent to develop catalysts for a diverse, equitable, and thriving America. MLT Rising Leaders are expected to lift others as they climb, and the 10+ regional chapters organizing professional development, social, and personal enrichment experiences across the nation are proof of that charge. There is no question that senior leaders have broad platforms to drive outsize impact for their organizations, communities, and society. In turn, MLT's Rising Leaders' individual and collective efforts create a unique multiplier effect that influences, inspires, and impacts countless others, not the least of which is their unique ability to be strong models of success for others coming up behind them.

EXPLANATORY THEORIES AND FRAMEWORKS RELATED TO CAREER CHOICE AND DEVELOPMENT FOR UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITIES

CAREER CHOICE AND DEVELOPMENT FOR MINORITIES are active fields of research across and between many academic disciplines ranging from Labor Economics and Sociology to Psychology and Management. They are also of keen interest to many policy makers in local, state, and federal government and non-profits. The associated framing literature and explanatory theoretical models are thus similarly broad and it is difficult, indeed impossible to narrow down a single most appropriate context for discussing career choice and development through the lens of ethnic diversity. Having said that there are several starting points in terms of research that offer useful nomenclature and insights for those seeking deeper discussion of the important dynamics at play.

One excellent point of departure is Stefano Tasselli, Martin Kilduff, and Jochen I. Menges (2015) literature review of organizational social structures; the authors compare and contrast a wealth of related research with the intent of examining: "To what extent do individual people construct and shape the social networks in which they are embedded? And to what extent are these networks constitutive of the individuals themselves in terms of individuals' characters and outcomes?" In doing so they highlight a constructive debate between across three distinct positions "asking whether the people, considered as individuals with characteristic traits and cognitions, make the network; whether the network, through structural patterning, makes the people; or whether people, in their idiosyncrasies, and networks, in their differentiated structures, co-evolve."

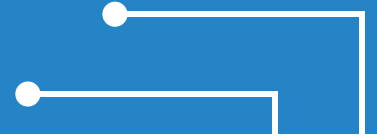
Such considerations obviously have important overlap with regard to the career choice of underrepresented minorities. Roberto Fernandez and Isabel Fernandez-Mateo's 2006 paper on "Networks, Race, and Hiring" is a great example and indeed contributed to many more studies such as those from McDonald et al (2009) and Castilla (2008) which examined "Gender, Race, and Job Leads" and Gender, Race, and Meritocracy in Organizational Careers" respectively.

Another rich area of discussion related to this paper is around the classic theories on individual choice applied to careers; for example, Holland's theory of vocational personalities and work environments six distinct personality traits: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional or RIASEC. Holland (1997) is one widely cited example that many academics have used to explore issues of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. One excellent recent example is Weaver, Crayne, and Jones paper from Industrial and Organizational Psychology that leans on Holland's core framework but layers on "Intersectional" research approach defined as "the multiple identities an individual holds and the ways in which these identities interact to influence an individual's life across domains" (Weaver 2016). Such approaches are extremely useful in helping to understand complexities and nuances associated with individual choices and how the interaction of multiple social identities influences attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and experiences.

Another cognitive decision making model that has direct relevance is the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). It aims to understand and explain the development of career interests, choices, and success using, specifically, three interlinked variables: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals. An interesting and useful starting point is a literature review by Hackett and Byar (1996) on African American women's career development from the perspective of social cognitive models like SCCT. Another related and worthwhile explanatory set of ideas is based on the role of attitudes and personalities in career choice. While not claiming to be definitive, the so-called Big Five dimensions of personality -- (1) Emotional Stability, (2) Extraversion, (3) Openness, (4) Agreeableness, and (5) Conscientiousness -- is among the most widely used and provides a useful, discrete set of parameters around which to structure research questions.

Finally, those interested will find an especially large collection of papers and research looking specifically at science and engineering careers or so-called STEM fields. A terrific recent collection of research and perspectives entitled "Moving Students of Color from Consumers to Producers of Technology" from Rankin and Thomas (2016).

In sum, the above is intended not as a complete review of related academic frameworks but as a set of starting points for those desiring a more complete look at the complex challenges associated with career choice and development for underrepresented minorities.



STUDY METHODOLOGY AND QUALIFICATIONS

IN THE SPRING OF 2017, MLT representatives conducted a series of individual phone interviews with twelve alumni of their programs. The latter were distributed across financial services, consumer goods, and technology industries with the majority still early in their careers but a few holding relatively senior positions already. The quotes and summary themes shared in this paper are intended to be representative of these interviews and provide insight into broader issues diverse individuals and their organizations face but are not necessarily generalizable beyond the specific context of each person.



ABOUT MANAGEMENT LEADERSHIP FOR TOMORROW (MLT)

MLT is a non-profit organization that is changing the face of leadership in the private and social sectors. MLT provides high-achieving African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans with a winning professional playbook, one-on-one coaching and door-opening relationships that accelerate their career paths from college to MBA to senior leadership. MLT has created a thriving network of more than 6,000 Rising Leaders and is fundamentally transforming the diverse talent pipelines at its partner organizations, including more than 100 leading corporations, nonprofits and graduate business schools. For more information, visit ML4T.org.

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