

# NORTH CAROLINA LAWYERS WEEKLY

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## Panelists discuss trials, successes of African-American attorneys

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The Charlotte School of Law and the Minority Focus Committee of the North Carolina Bar Association co-sponsored a panel discussion on "Diverse Excellence: Unconventional Success with a J.D."

Participants compared notes on the difficulties and triumphs of being a minority in the legal community and shared advice for young professionals in the same position.

Moderator Alonzo Alston, committee co-chair and president of Charlotte Law Diversity Alliance, said the event's purpose was to show young attorneys and law students, particularly African-Americans and other minorities, the possibilities that await them.

"Anyone, all persons, should recognize that there are opportunities beyond where they begin," Alston said. "Set your sights high, work hard, manage your relationships well, and proceed as if every day counts."

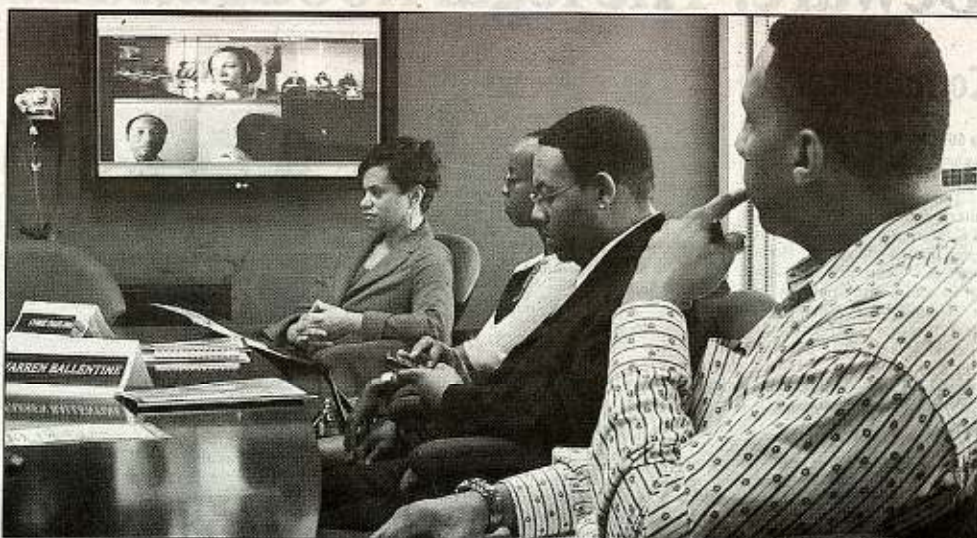
Alston noted that according to a nationwide survey of large law firms, only 4.4 percent of practicing attorneys are African-American.

"There's a disparity there," he said, adding that African-Americans make up 12 percent of the country's population.

Each of the panelists described what it was like to be part of that 4.4 percent.

Fred Whitfield, Charlotte Bobcats president and COO, told a story of a potential payroll mistake that occurred because of his race. Corie Pauling, senior counsel at TIAA-CREF, described a tough journey through law school during the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas controversy.

"Racism is institutionalized," said Warren Ballentine, host of the "Warren Ballentine Radio Show" and frequent guest correspondent on CNN. "You're



Panelists Corie Pauling, Victoria Carter, Warren Ballentine and other panelists spoke with some participants via web conferencing.

not going to find someone that's a racist today because it's a system."

"We can be part of the problem, though," Pauling responded. "We sometimes isolate ourselves into social networks full of people that look like us. If the same people you party with are the same people you study with, that's not good."

"You should work to expand your network, include people of all ethnicities," Victoria Carter added.

"Reach out, but don't forget where you come from," Ballentine said.

Adam Aberra, associate general counsel and senior VP of franchise

development at Five Guys Enterprises, said his clients are often shocked when they meet him because of his race and his relatively young age.

"When people find out that I'm an attorney ... they are surprised," he said. "I'm on a number of conference calls each day ... and they have no idea what I look like. Once they arrive here at the office, it's usually the same format: They come to my office and ask to speak to Adam Aberra — mind you, I'm behind my desk — and I'll tell them I'm Adam Aberra, and there is always a three-to-five-second pause as they process that I'm the guy they've

been talking to on the phone for months."

Though all the panelists have a J.D., several don't practice law on a regular basis. They encourage law students to look at their law degree as something that can create new opportunities.

"A law degree is a sign of credibility," Whitfield said, prompting several others to nod their heads in agreement. "It's not just about being a lawyer, [the degree] opens doors. Be proactive and use it to chase your dream."

Ballentine agreed: "People treat you differently when they know you have a J.D. Use it to your advantage."