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TECHNOLOGY

BBJ's 'Opportunity Gap' panelists emphasize 'early exposure'



The Boston Business Journal's all-women "STEM: The Opportunity Gap" panel included, clockwise from top left: Carolyn Jones, market president and publisher of Boston Business Journal, who moderated the discussion; Gilda Barabino, president of Olin College of Engineering; Aisha Francis, president and... more

LUCIA MAFFEI

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By Lucia Maffei
Technology Reporter, Boston Business Journal
3 hours ago

Early exposure is key to get more women and people of color in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, known as the STEM field. But employers and policymakers must do their part to bridge the gap.

These are some of the main takeaways from the Boston Business Journal's "STEM: The Opportunity Gap" event on Wednesday, which began with a snapshot: Only 34% of Black students who declare STEM majors graduate with a STEM degree compared to 54% of their white peers, according to a 2019 study of federal data.

Gilda Barabino, president of Olin College of Engineering, remembered the isolation and marginalization challenges she faced since the very beginning of her career before ultimately becoming the first African-American woman to take on a tenure-track position in chemical engineering in the country.

Barabino started studying chemistry to challenge her high school teacher, who ignored the women in the class.

"I've had a bit of experience with that solo status," she told moderator Carolyn Jones, market president and publisher of the Business Journal. "The early exposure, and getting people involved in innovation, and seeing others like them in the innovative space, really does make a difference."

Paying students to attend STEM-focused educational programs outside of the classroom, and simplifying the application process, are tangible ways to increase exposure, said Aisha Francis, president and CEO of the Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology.

"The goal should be to open the floodgates," Francis noted. "You never know who could then be exposed and where that spark gets lit."

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Together with exposure, the younger generation needs to see how STEM skills can have an impact on the world, said Emily Reichert, CEO of Somerville-based climate tech startup incubator Greentown Labs. Solving a global challenge like climate change require skills that do not fit under the traditional STEM category.

"You have the tools. What do you do with the tools?" she asked. "That's the part where I think industry needs to play a role,"

As much as early exposure to STEM increases the pipeline, employers cannot simply watch and wait. Francis said resources like trade organizations such as MassTLC, MassBio are out there to help employers find and retain underrepresented tech talent and "building a workforce that more closely mirrors our society."

Nicole Obi, president and CEO of the Black Economic Council of Massachusetts, said policymakers have to do their part by providing infrastructure support to families via tuition assistance or child care and elder care resources.

Citing a Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation study, Obi noted gross state product would increase by \$25 billion over five years if Massachusetts closed the racial wealth gap. "It's just good business," she said.

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Rank	School	Total FTE (Full-Time Equivalent) Student Enrollment For Fall 2021
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2	University of Massachusetts Amherst	29,803.00
3	Boston University	29,593.00
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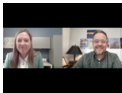
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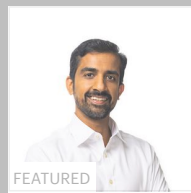
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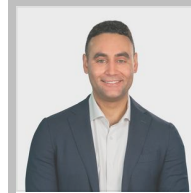
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