

OPINION

From the June 3, 2005 print edition

**Notebook**

**Project explores minorities, sciences**

[Bernard Dagenais](#)

Marquita M. Qualls is a rarity. She's a black woman with a career in life sciences. Her experience has made her one of the backers of a Philadelphia research project that sets out to determine how to encourage more minorities to get involved in a promising field for the region.

Qualls is a research chemist working with [GlaxoSmithKline](#) in Collegeville. She also is president of the National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers and serves on the advisory board that is guiding the research effort.

"If we can find out if there are barriers -- be they real or perceived -- our goal is to identify and fill those gaps," Qualls said.

The project, called Pathways, is being funded by a \$75,000 Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development grant.

The project is being led by Osiris Group, a Philadelphia firm that works in communications, fund raising and management. Jeremiah J. White Jr. is chairman of the group and heading the Pathways project.

"As Philadelphia emerges, we want to see the numbers of African Americans who can get involved in venture-backed businesses as owners grow," White said, acknowledging that it's not easy to start such a business. "There are a lot of barriers. It doesn't matter what color you are."

Pathways sets out to find out how minorities perceive life sciences and the possibility of getting involved in them. The region has resources that encourage entrepreneurs, but Qualls questioned how broadly known they are.

Organizations such as the Science Center, which funneled the grant to the study, strive to encourage commercialization of research. Grants and other help can come from organizations such as the state's Ben Franklin Technology Partners and [BioAdvance](#), the biotech greenhouse that puts tobacco industry settlement money toward life science companies, and Innovation Philadelphia, a city-sponsored economic development group.

While the goal is to get minorities more broadly involved in life sciences management, top level jobs are far from the only ones that the region's life sciences industry will need to continue its growth.

"You have to have people in the pipeline," said Gary Kurtzman, head of BioAdvance and another member of the Pathways advisory board. "You can participate at many levels from lab technician to CEO of a company."

Ultimately, the success of the region's education and training programs will influence its success as a life sciences center.

That's why groups such as the Greater Philadelphia Bioinformatics Alliance, which was founded by Drexel University and the University of Pennsylvania, have made work force development a priority.

White hopes blacks and other minorities can be encouraged to take advantage of such general interest programs. He hopes Philadelphia students looking for a brighter future will come to see this sector as an opportunity to leave behind inner-city poverty: "Math and sciences is going to be the way out."

White said the survey's backers are reaching out to individuals in any way it can, using personal contacts and other avenues, such as this column. The task is all the more difficult because there is little research available on the topic to serve as a starting point.

Anyone interested a survey can contact White at [jwhite@osiris-inc.com](mailto:jwhite@osiris-inc.com) or call him at 215-966-6121.

*Bernard Dagenais, editor of Philadelphia Business Journal, can be reached at [bdagenais@bizjournals.com](mailto:bdagenais@bizjournals.com).*