

The Academic Forum and Professional Development Committee
and
The Pro Bono and Access to Justice Committee

Session for Monday, October 4, 10 a.m.

'Skid row': poverty law and pro bono work by lawyers

Speaker: Maryam Ahranjani

1. Your program:

- What institution houses your program?
American University Washington College of Law in Washington, DC houses the Marshall-Brennan Constitutional Literacy Project
- What degree does it offer?
WCL offers JD, LLM, and SJD degrees. Students in my program (“Marshall-Brennan Fellows”) earn 5-6 course credits toward their degree.
- What sorts of positions do your graduates generally seek?
I don't keep track of this data, but anecdotally, approximately 1/3 of Marshall-Brennan Fellows go into private practice, 1/3 into government service of some kind (JAG, clerkships, federal and state government) and 1/3 into other public interest (NGOs). There are one or two students each year who find jobs in academia.
- Do your students have court access?
Yes. Many Marshall-Brennan Fellows take their high school students to observe state and federal courts. In terms of structured visits, we send more law students and high school students to observe oral argument at the U.S. Supreme Court than any other group in the country.

2. Agencies or firms outside of academia that you work with:

- Do you work with agencies or firms that themselves serve the low-income public or that assist you in serving the low-income public?
We work directly with a number of local and national non-profit organizations and indirectly through coalitions. Most of these organizations are dedicated to access to quality education for low-income and minority students.

- How have you become acquainted with agencies or firms that you work with? How do you maintain relationships with those persons? If you seek to expand your network, how do you do so?
We have built up these relationships over time through personal and professional contacts. We maintain those relationships by inviting partners to attend events, honoring them at our end-of-year celebrations, and through Facebook. We expand networks by scheduling conference calls and in-person visits whenever possible and by inviting people to various events that we host (moot court competitions, directors' meetings, end-of-year celebrations, academic seminar at the law school, etc.).
- Do those agencies identify persons needing services or broader issues needing development and resolution?
Yes, they do. Those agencies share information about programs (scholarships, camps, etc.) that would benefit our students.
- Do you refer individuals needing services to other firms or agencies? Do you work with agencies that provide services?
We are always working to refer the children in our courses for services they need to thrive. Many of the students have special education needs, they need access to information about standardized tests for college entrance (SAT, ACT), and they often need help with financial aid forms and scholarships. On occasion, we refer students who need legal assistance for school disciplinary hearings. We also refer students for mental health services, for domestic violence assistance, and other social services as these needs arise. We have relationships with a number of local non-profits that accept referrals.
- Do you conduct "due diligence" to determine the competence of persons to whom you refer individuals? Do you provide training to such persons?
Based on reputation and personal relationships, we assume these individuals are competent to perform the functions for which we are referring students.
- Do you have special relationships with graduates of your institution for referring cases?
Yes, quite a few.
- Do lawyers whom you refer cases to charge for their services (the "low-bono" model)?
Generally, they do not charge for their services since they are working for non-profit organizations.

3. Outcomes for students and partners

- Do you encourage mentorship of your students by practitioners?
Yes! We especially draw upon our alumni to serve as guest speakers and mentors.

- What can your program do to support teaching by practitioners?
This is an area where we've had some difficulty. It's a challenge to coordinate regular participation in the public school classes by practitioners. That said, we do have a number of special events where practitioners come to train our students and serve as a resource.
- Are your students motivated by networking opportunities with your partners?
Yes. A number of them find summer and post-graduate employment with our partners.
- Do you think that your students are more likely to undertake pro bono work in their professional careers after working in your program?
Anecdotally, I would say this is the case. A pair of AU professors, one of whom is a former Marshall-Brennan herself, are conducting a study of the outcomes of our fellows and the impact of the experience on their own civic engagement, views of public education, and career outcomes. Once this study is completed (probably in about one year), I hope to have data to support this hunch.
- Do you think that your organization makes pro bono opportunities available for local lawyers who might otherwise not undertake as much pro bono work? Are there features of your organization that make pro bono opportunities more accessible to local lawyers?
Interestingly, many attorneys complain that it is difficult to find meaningful pro bono work. In order to provide free legal advice regarding local law, attorneys must be licensed in DC and must have liability insurance. Many attorneys in the District are barred in other jurisdictions, and some do not carry liability insurance. Also, from the perspective of the sponsoring organization, it's very difficult to train and rely upon volunteer attorneys. That said, the DC Bar and various "special interest" bar associations (Hispanic Bar Association for DC, Iranian-American Bar Association, Women's Bar Association, to name a few) do offer free legal clinics to members of the community. Our organization is popular for attorneys who are particularly interested in education reform, teaching, mentoring, and increasing the opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to become lawyers. We rely on these volunteers to serve as guest speakers and also to serve as judges at our moot court competitions throughout the year.

4. What models of academic-community partnership, other than those you engage in, are present in your community?

All the law schools in Washington, DC (Georgetown, GW, WCL, UDC, Catholic, and Howard) provide legal clinics free of charge to low-income members of the community. All the universities coordinate various pro bono and volunteer opportunities for their students and graduates. The one that is most similar to ours is probably the Street Law Clinic at Georgetown Law Center.