Lessons from the First Three Years of the NALP/Street Law Legal Diversity Pipeline Program

by Millicent Bond

Four years ago NALP and Street Law, Inc., jointly created the NALP/Street Law Legal Diversity Pipeline Program. The project partners high school classrooms and law firms at nine sites in seven cities. I’ve had the pleasure of working on this project as the program fellow for the past three years.

When I tell people my job has involved coordinating legal education programs that bring together high school classrooms with law firms in an effort to encourage diverse students to pursue legal careers, the logical follow-up question is usually, “How many of the kids end up being lawyers?” Theoretically this is a great question. In reality, however, it overlooks an important piece of the equation. You cannot measure the immediate success of a diversity pipeline program that reaches students during high school by counting up the number of students who ultimately become lawyers because at the point these students participate in the program entering law school is not an immediate goal.

Is it our intention to increase diversity in the legal profession? Yes. Is this a goal we can measure during the fourth year of a high school-based program? No. None of our participants have reached law school yet and certainly none of them have begun working for a NALP member law firm as a lawyer.

Last summer my Street Law colleague and I set out to evaluate NALP and Street Law’s law firm-based diversity pipeline program. When determining what questions we wanted the evaluation to answer, we repeatedly found ourselves asking what are this program’s goals and how can we measure our success in meeting these goals?

We have found that the majority of the student participants have left the program with an increased interest in the law and that they are inspired by lawyer volunteers as professional role models. Additionally, the law firm participants report that their lawyer volunteers enjoy working with students and express an interest in working with students again.

When we thought about measuring the program’s achievements we determined that at the high school level it’s important to provide students with an introduction to the profession, to help them understand what they can do now to increase their chances of reaching law school and ultimately entering the legal profession, and to give students the opportunity to interact with lawyers who are genuinely interested in sharing their experiences. In short, we focused on our measurable goals in order to evaluate whether the steps we were taking were likely to lead to that long-term goal of increasing diversity in the profession.

Based on our discussions we decided to focus our evaluation on measuring:

• whether students’ interest in legal careers increased,
• whether students’ understanding of the legal profession improved, and
• whether students were inspired by the lawyers as professional role models.
To answer these questions we surveyed high school program participants before and after they participated in the NALP/Street Law Legal Diversity Pipeline Program, then compared their before-and-after responses and measured the changes in their answers. We found in part that of those students who responded, 67% said they were more interested in becoming a lawyer after the program than they were before and that they overwhelmingly felt inspired by the lawyers as career role models.

The process of evaluating our program taught us that just as with any other initiative it is important to identify your goals and then determine how you are going to measure success when creating or joining a pipeline program. Is your organization hoping to establish a program to increase the number of diverse candidates in next year’s summer class? If so, the programming will need to focus on reaching students who are eligible to be summer associates by next summer. Is the goal to reach young people in your community with the hope of creating a long-term relationship with a school or classroom? If so, you’ll need to identify a supportive classroom or student organization that is interested in supporting a partnership with a legal organization. Do you want to create a volunteer experience for associates or law students? If so you will need to find a program that calls for volunteer support. Once you’ve asked these questions you will be better able to make the case for supporting a pipeline program to all the stakeholders involved.

The feel-good factor of pipeline programs is compelling and will certainly win the support of some, but in order to see more success it’s necessary to really dig in and ask, as we have been, “What are we trying to achieve with a pipeline initiative and how are we doing?”

To learn more about the NALP/Street Law Legal Diversity Pipeline Program and how your firm or school might participate, see www.nalp.org/streetlaw.

In May, Millicent Bond concluded three years as the first NALP/Street Law Legal Diversity Pipeline Program Fellow. The NALP office will welcome a new Fellow in August.