Diversity Champions:
NALP’s Celebration of Leaders
Moving Diversity Forward
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When it comes to the topic of diversity, we are used to seeing statistics and reading what we could be doing better to improve diversity in the legal profession. But how often do we hear about the successes in the industry? In today’s global economy, a diverse workforce is vital to building organizational strength. An often overlooked strategy for improving diversity is to tap into the wealth of knowledge and survival tactics of diverse leaders. Former NALP President LeaNora Ruffin charged the NALP Diversity Section with exploring this largely untapped resource. As a result of that charge, the Diversity Leadership: The Retention/Inclusion Imperative Work Group (the “Diversity Leadership Work Group”) was formed. The goal of this assignment was to celebrate diverse leadership within the legal industry by identifying and interviewing diverse professionals — both active NALP members and practicing lawyers — and featuring their stories, challenges, and victories in a collection of profiles for the NALP membership. The profiles not only pay tribute to the inspiring works of these diverse professionals but also highlight some of the best retention and inclusion efforts available, particularly in light of the economic challenges facing the legal industry.

The profiles featured in this collection are the result of interviews conducted by members of the NALP Diversity Leadership Work Group in 2009 and 2010. Many thanks to LeaNora Ruffin for her leadership and vision and for entrusting the NALP Diversity Section with such an important project. Special thanks to the members of the Diversity Leadership Work Group for their tireless efforts and dedication to making this collection possible: 2009-2010 Section Chair Kisha Nunez (Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz) and 2010-2011 Section Chair Nicole Horne White (Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP); 2009-2010 Vice-Chairs Crystal Deazle (Widener University School of Law) and Donna Harris (Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP); 2010-2011 Vice Chairs Melanie Priddy (Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP) and Denise Robinson (O’Melveny & Myers LLP); and Millicent Bond (NALP/Street Law), Ingrid Davidsen (formerly of Holland & Knight LLP), Chia Kang (Ropes & Gray LLP), Donna Mannion (DLA Piper), Eliza Park Musallam (American University Washington College of Law), Susan Piotrowski (Morrison & Foerster LLP), and Elvera Pollard (Blank Rome LLP).

All affiliations listed for the contributors above and for those profiled within these pages are as of the time of writing and compilation of this resource.
LeaNora Ruffin, the Assistant Dean of Career Development at Widener University School of Law and the 2009-2010 President of NALP, traces her professional journey to early childhood. She explains, “There is a thread that has been going back since I was ten or eleven years old.” It was at this time that she first joined the Prep for Prep program in New York City. “Basically,” she says, “for fourteen months, we had what you could call an immersion program to prepare for a preparatory school … it opened my mind.” The program fostered her ever-growing interest in academia and ultimately led to her current position as Widener’s Assistant Dean of Career Development. “What I love is drawing on my experiences at Prep,” she recalls. “Excellence, commitment, integrity and courage are the program’s core values, and I work my best when I am traveling along that path.”

LeaNora began her career practicing law after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania Law School. Practice was both exhilarating and challenging. However, during this time, she always thought fondly to her times in high school, college, and law school, where she carved out time to mentor and tutor. The experiences working with students encouraged her to pursue a position at Widener. Working at the law school serves as a constant reminder of her own experiences as an African-American law student and, early on, inspired her to become involved with Widener’s efforts to create an inclusive institution by joining its Diversity Committee.

LeaNora sees diversity as an important part of her job. Her interest stems from a general “concern about fairness and integrity of process,” and she is encouraged to stay involved because of her ability to identify with diverse students. She explains, “Having sensitivity to what it’s like to be a diverse person going through law school allows me to watch out for certain issues” that diverse students can face. She realizes that one “cannot underestimate the overwhelming isolation, the effects of lack of community, and how that plays out in [one’s] career.” She goes on to say, “When I talk to students everyday about the power of networking, I know from personal experience how hard that is.” This personal connection of belonging to an under-represented group has led LeaNora to “seek areas in [her] job where [she] can help level the playing field” by “looking at how [Widener] can make an opportunity more open to a wider group of people.”
When asked how she defines diversity, LeaNora explains, “It can be ethnicity, racial background, sexual orientation, but it also extends to diversity of thought and diversity of ideas.” She believes that the role of those working to increase diversity in any profession “is figuring out how we move the conversation to one about acknowledgment and appreciation of difference.” While she believes that pursuing critical mass within the legal community is important, she also contends that this may be setting the bar too low. She finds that efforts that focus too heavily on the “business case” for diversity fail to create the kind of commitment necessary to ride out huge challenges or barriers such as a recession. The business case, she emphasizes, “gives incentive to some people, but it doesn’t help you get over the hump”—it doesn’t lead to the level of commitment needed to sustain a diversity initiative over the long haul. She cites the legal community’s experiences during the recession as an example of when the business case fails. Furthermore, it seems to her that an approach that focuses only on the bottom line can be seen as “commoditizing diverse people” and alienating the very people that organizations hope to attract.

In addition to her deep commitment to diversity, LeaNora has had a long tenure with NALP and praises its role in her own professional development. She became involved because she wanted to learn from her colleagues and find an outlet to share her talents. She recommends that newer members approach the organization in a similar fashion, advising, “Have it in your goals to use NALP to learn.” It was this approach that led her to volunteer with different groups within the organization. As she offered her time, LeaNora became a leader within the membership, ultimately becoming the President of NALP. Despite this leadership role, she is quick to explain that becoming an active member does not necessitate seeking a titled position; rather she recommends that members “have flexibility in how they might be willing to help.”
When Jacqueline Cranford started her legal career, it was extremely rare to have a dedicated diversity professional in a law firm setting and diversity efforts in the profession overall were, as she notes, “not structured and lacked definition.” When law firms finally made a turn in the direction of prioritizing diversity, Jacqueline, who was advancing the cause long before it became a buzzword, was suited perfectly to take on the challenge full-time, which she has done for the last seven years, most recently as Vinson & Elkins LLP’s Director of Professional Development & Inclusion.

Jacqueline’s interest in the diversity arena took shape while she was a student at the University of Virginia School of Law. There, she engaged in discussions and efforts to address the lack of diversity in the profession that she would soon enter. Faced with the prospect of being one of only two black lawyers in one of the largest offices of the international law firm she would join upon graduation, she helped recruit other students of color to her firm during her third year in law school. The outreach worked, as the number of black and other associates of color steadily increased after she started. She went on to mentor and advise several of those associates who followed the trail she blazed well before most firms, including her own, employed formal diversity outreach and mentoring programs.

After about six years in private practice, Jacqueline decided to continue her legal career in government at the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). She recalls that she did not have to focus on diversity as much there “because they had diversity!” For instance, all of her supervisors at DOJ were women — the opposite of her experience at the firm, where all of the partners with whom she worked were men. And, many of her colleagues at DOJ were black women, also in sharp contrast to her experience at the firm.

Jacqueline later returned to the private sector, but this time in a role that allowed her to effectuate change from the law firm administration side. Specifically, she accepted a position in her former firm as its Legal Personnel Director, executing full-time many of the professional development-oriented activities in which she engaged in addition to her client work as an associate. And, while not part of her title, Jacqueline notes, “Diversity was very much a part of my responsibilities.” She continued this work when she moved to another international firm in 2001, including leading its recruiting and professional development departments and ultimately accepting appointment as its first Director of Diversity. She accepted the challenge because it was important to her “for someone to be dedicated fully to making sure these initiatives are carried out.”
now integrates the expertise she earned in these prior roles to carry out Vinson & Elkins’s holistic approach to development and inclusion initiatives.

When asked what diversity means to her, Jacqueline replied that it is “a coming together of various perspectives, ideas, experiences, and opinions in order to advance a cause.” To some degree, she attributes her ability to recognize and appreciate this variety to being a diverse individual. “Being diverse has informed my worldview and opened my eyes to what a lot of people have never had to consider.” She uses this awareness to both empathize with and impact others by raising their awareness about diversity.

Being a diverse professional does not come without its challenges, however. As a woman of color, she notes, “I always have to think about how I will be received, perceived, and addressed, as well as the potential of negative reactions or consequences relating to the things I say, do, or wear.” Similarly, due to high visibility and the low representation of women of color in this profession, she says that she and other minorities are “often the object of curiosity, and when they speak, others often assume they are speaking on behalf of a large group of people rather than themselves.”

Another challenge Jacqueline notes is the absence of role models of color in the profession, especially earlier in her career. She does her part to minimize this barrier for others by making herself available to individuals from a variety of backgrounds, including other women of color, to mentor and guide them through their professional and personal journeys. And, she has seized opportunities to be mentored across difference. Jacqueline says that her mentors, few of whom shared her race or gender, “have guided me every step of the way from high school to now.” Among other things, they encouraged and reminded her of her goal to pursue law school when she was a paralegal, shared words of wisdom as she selected and navigated her way through law school, and showed her the nuts and bolts of being a litigator. From these experiences, she has identified a number of characteristics of a good mentor, including a willingness to provide guidance, attentiveness, experience, wisdom, and the ability to talk through the pros and cons of a situation while allowing the mentee to make the final decision.

Speaking of mentoring, Jacqueline, a former member of NALP’s Board of Directors, wants new NALP members to know that leaders and other experienced professionals in the organization are willing to be a resource to them. So, how does a new member access these individuals? “Be proactive about letting them know you want to learn,” says Jacqueline. And, reflecting specifically upon her early experiences with NALP, she notes that new NALP members “have to be a bit bold and break into the circles,” especially at the NALP Annual Education Conference, to get to know people in the organization.
When Gihan Fernando, the Assistant Dean of Career Services at Georgetown Law, and former NALP President, was asked how his own personal diversity affects his day-to-day job, he made it clear that he sees aspects of his identity as helpful in his work with students. Identifying as an immigrant, he offers students a keen perspective on what it means to observe and understand cultural norms as they engage in their job searches. Finding the right fit requires careful consideration, and he finds it ironic that an outsider to the system is actually the one who holds a clear lens to look through and make observations. Gihan notes, “This balance has been very valuable in my work.”

Over the past several years, Gihan has seen a change in the employer landscape and reflected on meetings he held with firms no more than four or five years ago, when firms asked how they could better recruit diverse students. Upon receiving suggestions from him, firms would often say “that would never work in our firm.” Now when Gihan has similar conversations, the same firms say “we’ve done that, tell me more!” Gihan attributes this shift in part to clients’ desire that their lawyer teams be more diverse.

As diversity becomes more and more important to firms, different aspects of diversity are getting more traction. Specifically, there is more attention being given to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues and to disability issues. To that end, a few years ago the University of Arizona Rogers College of Law approached Gihan to work on the creation of a job fair for disabled law students. “There is a gap for finding placements for disabled students,” recalls Gihan, “and the thought was to hold the job fair in Washington, D.C., because the federal government has great hiring policies and opportunities.” The result was the creation of the Impact Career Fair for Law Students and Attorneys with Disabilities, which was first held in 2005 and has been very successful.

Given Gihan’s background and experience, his best advice to newcomers is to engage themselves in issues of diversity as fully as possible. “In the old days, you were preaching to the choir,” he reflects. “Now lots of people are in the conversation. If it is an issue you don’t share yourself, connect with constituents who have that demographic.” He continues, “For example, when we started the Impact Job Fair, I wasn’t so well versed in what the Americans with Disabilities Act required of the organizers of a job fair. We’ve all learned a tremendous amount in the process. Staying informed on the evolution of issues is critical.” Gihan encourages NALP members to really dig into issues and to be constantly challenged by what they don’t know.
Gihan also encourages NALP members to “volunteer, get involved, and try to contribute.” At every stage of his career, peers have often commented on Gihan’s ability to accomplish so much. He offers that he has routinely felt that he has gained more than he has put in. In involving himself in NALP activities, he advises, “You gain experience.” Gihan also treasures the relationships he has developed throughout his career. “Some great personal friendships have been great enhancements to my professional life. Issues keep moving forward through conversation, and just bouncing ideas around can go a long way in helping us all move forward.”

In addition to being the Assistant Dean of Career Services at Georgetown Law, Gihan’s professional activities have included serving on NALP’s Board, acting as NALP’s Liaison to the ABA Standing Committee on Minorities in the Judiciary, and serving on the advisory board for the ABA/NALP study on judicial clerkships.
Natalie Fleming Nolen
Litigation Associate at Morrison & Foerster LLP

By Susan Piotrowski

Natalie Fleming Nolen has packed a lot of substantive diversity work into her first four years as an associate in Morrison & Foerster’s New York office. Even as a summer associate, she was already providing valuable research to her partners regarding issues of free speech and civil rights.

After only a short time with Morrison & Foerster, Natalie was invited to participate in a panel discussion at a recruiting event for a number of the firm’s diverse summer candidates. The program was titled “The Diversity Imperative — Promoting a Diverse Workplace.” Natalie’s co-panelists were two partners of color, and the discussion was facilitated by the firm’s diversity manager. In addition to the recruits, the audience included partners at the highest levels of firm management.

Morrison & Foerster’s Attorney of Color Advisory Committee has been another high-profile avenue for Natalie’s diversity efforts. As a member of this committee, Natalie provides input to the firm on issues relating to diversity, assists with efforts to recruit lawyers of color, assists in planning diversity events, and works on other initiatives as needed. The committee is made up of associates and of counsel across the firm’s offices and works closely with the firm’s Professional Development Group.

Recognizing a need for mentoring and increased communication between lawyers and paralegals, Natalie and a few of her colleagues founded an affinity group for the New York office’s lawyers and paralegals of color. Some of these paralegals aspire to become lawyers themselves, so this group provides them with particularly valuable guidance and networking opportunities. Natalie also participates in additional affinity groups, including one for African-American women and another for female lawyers in her office.

Natalie has also extended herself as a mentor through a community program called Sponsors for Educational Opportunity (SEO) Corporate Law Program. Through this program, diverse students gain valuable training and experience prior to beginning law school. As a mentor for SEO, Natalie also serves as an assignment coordinator for a particular student who comes to the firm for six weeks to get hands-on exposure to real legal work. She is also able to facilitate priceless networking opportunities for her mentee with both associates and partners at Morrison & Foerster.

It is no surprise that Natalie’s inclination to mentor comes in part from having had a variety of influential mentors herself, including partners, associates, and professors. She describes her ideal mentor as someone who takes a sincere interest, has done something longer or better than she has, and has the ability to help her troubleshoot or work out tough problems.
A native of Canada, Natalie received her B.A. from the University of British Columbia. She then worked as a teacher in Thailand for three years before getting her J.D. from Harvard Law School in 2006. While she originally planned to join Morrison & Foerster’s San Francisco office, her husband’s career brought them to New York.

Natalie maintains that she has always been interested in the law. In addition to finding the work intellectually challenging, she likes working with teams on hard cases and achieving results that please their clients.

Like many people in her field, Natalie finds one of the greatest challenges to participating in diversity programs at a law firm is the need to juggle client work with non-billable initiatives. While programs or events involving travel across the country can be particularly impacted by evolving client priorities, the firm has been quite accommodating.

Natalie’s heritage includes “a large variety of different races.” She has lived in three different countries with varying cultures and systems of law, all valuable experiences. Naturally, her definition of diversity is a broad one. She describes it as a mixture of people from distinct backgrounds, including various socio-economic circumstances and countries, bringing these different experiences to a common place.

According to Natalie, her diverse roots and life experiences serve as an advantage in a worldwide law practice at a firm like Morrison & Foerster. “It helps me relate to different people and see common ground. When you are faced with difficulty in communicating, as I was while working in Asia,” she explains, “this can help you work through differences to reach a common goal.”
If you ask Alphonzo Grant how he divides his time between his duties as Special Counsel for Sullivan & Cromwell’s Criminal Defense and Investigation Group and as the firm’s Director of Diversity Initiatives, he will probably reply: 100/100%. Since 2006, Alphonzo has been successfully leading the firm’s diversity initiatives while continuing to practice in his field. He accepted this challenge in large part because he knew from experience that the firm was committed to fostering diversity initiatives and that, given its stature in the legal community, the firm could and would have an impact on the legal industry as a whole.

Alphonzo defines diversity as “a means of bringing people of different backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, etc., together and supporting and utilizing the different perspectives they bring to the table to accomplish a common purpose or goal.” He believes that America’s melting pot history highlights how diversity benefits the larger group through the introduction of different perspectives, new ways of thinking, fresh ideas, and creative solutions.

Alphonzo notes that over the last ten years there have been positive changes in the diversity landscape of big law firms. While in years past, minorities and women may have had preconceived notions of negative treatment on the part of the law firm. This, coupled with ideas that the law firm was scrutinizing and holding diverse individuals to a different standard, may have presented impediments to women and minorities to focus completely on the lawyering job at hand. While these perceptions may still linger, Alphonzo believes that the big change that has occurred is that much of the employee/employer/workplace expectations, as well as cultural, ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation differences and stereotypes, are being discussed openly. Accordingly, people are more comfortable coming into an organization, resulting in their ability to place greater focus on learning to become good lawyers.

On the topic of mentoring, Alphonzo believes that mentor characteristics will vary with the particular resource a lawyer is seeking at a particular time in his/her career development. It is important, he says, for lawyers to be proactive and actively seek out mentoring guidance when they need it as opposed to waiting for it to come to them within a formal mentorship system or program, and this needs to be stressed more at the law school and professional development training levels.
Alphonzo tells those who regard him as a mentor, “Establish your resources; learn the ground rules and remember that first impressions count.” He continues, “You will also have to overcome perceptions others may have of you as well as perceptions you may have of others, and this will continue throughout your career.”

As a diversity professional, Alphonzo believes that the goal should be to work toward one day having his function deemed no longer necessary because the concept of diversity and inclusion has become so deeply embedded within the firm’s culture that previous concerns will no longer be present. For the present time, however, to achieve success in diversity and inclusion initiatives, Alphonzo believes that a law firm needs committed leadership. Diversity should be integrated into every aspect of the firm and all of its professional groups (e.g., Recruitment; Professional Development, Diversity Management, H.R., etc.) should work together. The processes these groups have worked side by side to implement will ultimately result in a more diverse and inclusive work environment.

Alphonzo graduated from Brooklyn Law School in 1998 and clerked for the Hon. Edward R. Korman, former chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York from 1998 to 1999. He joined Sullivan & Cromwell in 1999 and was one of two associates invited to serve on the firm’s initial Diversity Committee. After leaving the firm in 2002, he went to work as an Assistant U.S. Attorney in the Eastern District of New York, assigned to the Violent Crimes and Terrorism Unit. While in that office, Alphonzo served on committees that were focused on diversity initiatives and hiring. He returned to Sullivan & Cromwell in his present capacity in 2006.
Laurie S. Hane
Technology Transactions Partner at Morrison & Foerster LLP

By Susan Piotrowski

Laurie S. Hane has seen dramatic changes in the diversity landscape since she started her career. When she joined Morrison & Foerster as an associate 25 years ago, she was one of just a few lawyers of color at the firm. “It was considered groundbreaking at the time to have a female partner,” Laurie says. “Diversity wasn’t consciously focused on by most firms.”

Laurie supports a broad definition of diversity, inclusive of race, sexual orientation, gender, disabilities, and socio-economic background. She acknowledges that the legal profession has not yet achieved a population that reflects this broader diversity at senior levels and in leadership roles.

Some of the positive changes Laurie has seen include the emergence of diversity-related bar associations on both the local and national level, diversity initiatives by more law firms, and an increase in attention to diversity by a number of clients.

According to Laurie, being a minority, female lawyer posed challenges and provided some advantages at the same time. “It can be intimidating to be the only woman or minority in a meeting or courtroom. You have to have a lot of self-confidence to walk into these situations.” On the flip side, she found that people remembered her in part because she did stand out. She also felt less constrained by a certain way of thinking and felt free to take an “outside of the box” approach.

After graduating from Northwestern University School of Law, Laurie served as a law clerk to a Chief Judge for the United States District Court of the Northern District of California. She joined Morrison & Foerster in 1985 and was promoted to partner in 1991.

Laurie had a variety of mentors at the firm over the years and credits them with playing a substantial role in her success. “The qualities of a great mentor depend on what you are looking for at the time. Important characteristics include honesty, common sense, and empathy.” Many of Laurie’s mentors were great lawyers and some, in particular, were great teachers. Others simply watched out for her and promoted her within the firm. While none might have been a perfect mentor in all ways, each was outstanding in some way.
With support and encouragement from her mentors, Laurie became involved in a number of influential firm committees, such as the recruiting committee and the associate and partner evaluation committees. (She currently serves as the sponsor partner for one of the firm’s affinity groups for women of color.) “In order to make a difference,” Laurie says, “it is important to have a voice in these decisions.”

Laurie has developed her voice through a number of management roles at Morrison & Foerster, including several years as one of the firmwide Managing Partners for Operations. Laurie has also utilized her role as a practice group leader to identify, recruit, and promote women and lawyers of color. A former co-chair of the firm’s Business Department, she recently served as co-chair the Technology Transactions Group.

As co-chair of Morison & Foerster’s Diversity Strategy Committee, Laurie oversees the firm’s diversity initiatives surrounding the recruitment, development, and advancement of underrepresented lawyers. The committee is composed of senior and mid-level partners, including the firm’s Chair and firmwide Managing Partners for Operations, the Director of Attorney Recruiting, and the Director of Professional Development. One of Laurie’s accomplishments as chair has been the hiring of a dedicated firmwide Diversity Manager, who serves as an active member of this high-profile committee. According to Laurie, the development of the diversity profession has been one of the more positive changes in the industry.

Laurie has found that institutionalizing diversity efforts is key. Programs that are carried out year after year become part of the fabric of firm life. “One of the key barriers to integrating diverse attorneys,” Laurie explains, “is the 24/7 world we practice law in. People are spread thin and have less time to mentor or reach out. This is actually a challenge for all junior attorneys.”
Today, it is fairly common for law firms to hire a dedicated diversity professional to oversee and implement diversity initiatives. Yet despite the fact that these positions are more common, being a diversity officer for a major international law firm comes with its challenges. But Maja Hazell, a long-standing NALP member, Vice-Chair of NALP’s 2010 Annual Education Conference, and President of the Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals (ALFDP), was well-equipped and ready for the adventure ahead when she was tapped for the newly created position of Director of Diversity and Inclusion of Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP over three years ago.

In many respects, Maja, a graduate of Georgetown University Law Center, has been a diversity leader since her days of practicing law at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP. She started there as a Labor & Employment Litigation associate and later became an Executive Compensation and Employee Benefits attorney, where she found herself counseling clients and providing legal advice. She recalls, “What I ultimately found while I was practicing is that I was spending a lot of time helping partners with administrative functions at the firm: recruiting, personnel issues, associate retention efforts, as well as giving advice to junior, diverse associates who had questions on how to navigate a large law firm structure and whether they were meeting expectations.” These skills would later be transferable to her diversity position at Fried Frank.

Maja’s role at Fried Frank touches upon many facets of the firm’s culture, as diversity concerns are integral to many different functions at the firm, including human resources, marketing, attorney recruitment, and professional development. She works closely with the firm’s Diversity Committee to execute firm diversity strategy, and she oversees all mentoring initiatives. Her background played a large role in preparing her to work with a diverse group of lawyers with varied points of view to create an inclusive environment.

An African-American woman, Maja grew up in a very diverse section of the Bronx in New York City. She remembers, “It wasn’t until I went to college [at Yale] that I found people tended to segregate themselves, embracing identity politics.” These experiences have given her the perspective that people should interact with one another despite their varied experiences. Accordingly, one of Maja’s largest roles at the firm is to bridge the gap between associates, partners, and management of all backgrounds. “I think workplaces are incredibly important cultural spaces where you have a real opportunity for people to learn from another,” she says. She continues,
“While we often reside, worship, and socialize in racially and culturally segregated spaces, the workplace holds a lot of promise in fostering communication and understanding across differences.”

As with any organization, not everyone will see eye to eye. Different lawyers and staff tend to be on different ends of the decision-making spectrum, and it is Maja’s function at Fried Frank to bring all parties involved together to the same table, to find out what works, what’s best for the firm and best for all parties. “I would define diversity and inclusion as a respect for different points of view from different types of people, and that conscious respect translates into consistent efforts to have diverse people at the table in decision making, in teams, and in many different functions in the workplace.”

Prior to joining Fried, Frank, Maja used her counseling skills to work directly with law school students at Pace University School of Law as the Assistant Dean for Career Development. “It was an opportunity to give advice and counsel students, and I absolutely loved it,” she remembers. She was attracted to the position because the Dean had also come from private practice, and he was looking for someone with a similar, large firm background who would come in, strategize, think outside the box, and bring a different type of service to the law school career services role.

Today Maja’s lawyering and counseling skills and passion for diversity and inclusion come into play every day in her role at Fried Frank. “I’m very passionate about my work. I really enjoy helping people strategize, problem solve, and think about what is the best way to help get them from Point A to Point B.”

For those newly appointed diversity professionals, Maja’s advice would be to “be prepared for how broad your role is going to be. Be very creative and strategic about getting assistance from others [at your firm] to get the job done because in order to do your job effectively, you have to juggle so many different areas and priorities.” Also, be willing to be mentored. Maja consulted and surrounded herself with supportive mentors who were willing to show her the ropes. “When looking for a mentor within your organization, you want someone who is open and someone who is fairly secure in their own role such that they’re willing to share information and be an advocate for you. And it doesn’t matter what that person’s background is; it doesn’t matter if they’re the same gender, same race, or same religion.”
When it comes to diversity, Traci Mundy Jenkins has watched the profession ebb and flow. “Many of the conversations that I have today about diversity are the same ones I had about ten years ago,” she notes. “The dialogue in the profession then died down for a while, but resumed about five to six years ago.” Traci’s commitment to diversity, however, has never wavered.

Currently, Traci is the Assistant Dean of the Office of Career and Professional Development at American University Washington College of Law (WCL), a school where students of color make up 30-35% of each incoming class. In this capacity, she and her staff are involved directly in a number of diversity efforts, including working very closely with diverse student organizations to provide support for their programs and other initiatives. Traci also is a member of WCL’s Multicultural Development Committee, which is made up of senior administrators and alumni who work together to ensure that diverse students are “plugged into the law school.”

Traci and her office also work closely, and enjoy a great relationship, with WCL’s Office of Diversity Services (ODS). Among other things, Traci has devoted many hours of her time to numerous diverse students as part of a mentoring program offered through ODS. Traci’s office also collaborates with ODS on two diversity-focused conferences held annually at the school — The Hispanic Law Conference and the Sylvania Woods Conference on African-Americans and the Law.

Traci acknowledges that the support of WCL’s leadership has been key in her ability to advance diversity efforts. “At WCL, the commitment to diversity is top down,” she says, explaining that because of the dean’s commitment to diversity the entire school is dedicated to supporting an inclusive environment for all students. “I think everyone can agree that diversity is something we should do, but whether or not you actually see diversity in action is a different matter,” says Traci. Illustrating this point, she notes that the dean of the law school’s commitment to diversity is reflected in the number of individuals from traditionally under-represented backgrounds within the faculty and within his senior administration.

Consistent with her own broad definition of diversity, Traci’s efforts go beyond diversity that is visible. She sees diversity in the myriad experiences, preferences, and ways of thinking people embody. It also extends to the wide variety of professional aspirations her students have. “Do
you want to practice law? Where? Private sector or public sector?” asks Traci in articulating just a few of the questions that her students confront as they explore the vocational options available to them.

There is no doubt Traci’s own career path has contributed to her open-mindedness regarding the range of career opportunities available to her students. Before assuming her current position, Traci enjoyed a successful career as a legal recruiter, most recently as the managing partner and one of the founders of a legal professional staffing firm. As a recruiter, sending her clients a diverse slate of candidates “was just part of what I did,” says Traci, whose custom led to employers seeking out her diversity expertise and, ultimately, to a diversity consulting practice.

Prior to her legal recruiting experience, Traci practiced law for seven years in a large firm that is now based in DC. Reflecting upon her own experience as an African-American woman lawyer in private practice, where the struggle to find and keep diverse talent continues — a struggle shared by many public sector employers — Traci sees great promise in diversity pipeline programs. “To expand the pool of diverse lawyers, you have to increase the number of diverse law school students,” says Traci in explaining why pipeline programs are critical to advancing diversity in the profession on a broader scale.

On an individual level, Traci’s career exemplifies the importance of having mentors along the way, especially to diverse professionals. A function of the dearth of diversity in the profession, few of Traci’s mentors have shared her race or gender, but they have plenty of other similarities that have made them a good match. These mentors have advocated for her professional development, as well as offered sage career and personal advice when she needed it. Traci makes it a priority to stay in touch with them as she journeys forward in her career. Based upon her experience, Traci defines a good mentor as someone who will be honest with you and keep confidences, and she adds that one should remember that mentoring “works both ways — you have to be a good mentee.” Similarly, coupled with having mentors who will advocate for you, she notes that it is important to be able to advocate for yourself.

Actively engaging with NALP has been important in Traci’s development as a leader in the profession as well. She segued into NALP by becoming active in her city group, WALRAA, including serving as its president, and recommends a similar path for those who are interested in becoming more involved. In addition, she offers the following advice to those who are new to NALP: “With NALP, the network and resources are laid out for you, but it is up to you to take advantage of them.”
“I think I am naturally a litigator, just by temperament,” says Helen Kim of herself when asked how she came to be a litigation partner in the Los Angeles office of Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP. Helen’s position as partner is just one of the growing number of minority partners at firms in Los Angeles, and she acknowledges that she is now a role model to minority associates. Yet she did not have much in the way of role models during her rise in the ranks. “When I graduated law school [and went to work] in New York, there wasn’t a single Asian female litigation partner in the entire city.” Helen became very involved in the Asian American Bar Association in New York because “there weren’t any other role models. I couldn’t look at any firm, because they weren’t there.”

After graduating from Yale Law School 20 years ago, Helen clerked on the Second Circuit for a year, and then went to an Am Law 100 firm for six years. But during her six years there, “not a single woman was put up in litigation for partner — white or minority,” Helen remembers. So she looked for opportunities elsewhere and joined Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP, where she eventually made partner. After spending time at Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP, she came to Katten in February 2008.

While diversity is an important part of her role as an attorney, Helen acknowledges in her current position at Katten that very few of her clients are minorities and almost all of her work is for non-minorities. However, most of Helen’s extracurricular work is for organizations that focus on diversity. Three years ago, Helen was president of the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA), and prior to that she was president of the Korean Lawyers Association of Greater New York. Helen now serves on the ABA Commission for Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession. Helen explains her involvement as reflecting her greater responsibility as a diverse attorney. “As a minority, I think I have an obligation to give back to the people who are climbing up the ranks now to kind of try to spread the word of our experiences … so they don’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

As for what the diversity landscape looked like when she started her legal career 20 years ago versus now, Helen recognizes that there has been some progress. “Women are doing better now… [and] there has been a huge surge in the number of Asians” in the legal profession, Helen explains. However, there continues to be a dearth of African-Americans and Hispanics in partnership roles. In her observations, that is where Helen says she has seen the least amount of change, and she attributes much of this to the lack of mentorship.
Yet for many young lawyers, finding a professional mentor can be daunting. In looking back on her career, Helen notes that since there were very few Asian-American women in partnership positions whom she could model her career after, she turned to those who were available and willing to teach. “I had mentors, [but] they were men. White males were my mentors,” Helen remembers, “and when I talk to other minorities and other women, this is not uncommon.” The key, Helen advises, is to look for mentors who are naturally teachers, regardless of their ethnic background. Also, new lawyers should focus on people who have an interest and who enjoy seeing a young lawyer do well. Helen is quick to add that you don’t have to have only one mentor; you should have as many as you can.

As important as mentorship is to a young lawyer, Helen cautions that the best advice to a new attorney is to be proactive. “I think a person who is proactive in seeking help, seeking assistance, that person is going to get a lot more attention than someone who... just waits for something.” This may mean asking a lot of questions or asking a partner their preferences as to writing style, format, etc., all of which is preferable to making assumptions. Helen cautions, “It falls on the associate to be the one asking — to look for assistance. I think [partners] want to help when asked to help. I much prefer that proactive person than someone who is sitting back and waiting for that comment. That would be my biggest single [piece of] advice.”
Petal Modeste

Dean of Career Services at Columbia Law School

By Donna Manion

Petal Modeste, the current Dean of Career Services at Columbia Law School, grew up in Trinidad and Tobago, where she was never considered a minority. “I never knew what it was to be a diverse person in the way that Americans understand it,” she recalls. That changed when she emigrated to the U.S. and “heard this word ‘minority’ and understood its social consequences,” she says. Unlike her prior experiences, she says she found herself “in a world where the color of my skin and my gender meant something to some people.” As a result, Petal defines diversity as the amalgamation of all the things that make each of us uniquely ourselves.

Petal remembers the diversity landscape being fairly bleak when she started her legal career as a corporate associate at Sherman & Sterling. While interviewing at law firms, Petal recalls that there were not many lawyers who looked like her or came from her part of the world, particularly in partnership or management roles. She has observed in recent years that law firms are taking a closer look at how they hire and promote, yet there is still much to accomplish.

Much of the improvement can be attributed to clients’ demands. Petal is pleased that clients have been more vocal about the need for firms to create more diverse teams. Yet despite this progress she asks, “Has the impact been felt fully at management levels? Not yet,” she responds in answer to her own question. But she acknowledges that that there has been an improvement. “All of this is progress. Things are changing for the better,” she notes.

In thinking about some of the challenges she has faced during her career Petal comments, “Some people want to put you in a specific box. They look at you and form opinions about what you can and cannot do.” She has found that the only way to disabuse preconceived notions about who she is and what she can do is to prove them wrong. “This is about what I expect of myself, not what you think of me,” she asserts.

Petal believes that “if you open yourself up to others, seek to make meaningful connections, strive for excellence in everything you do, and do it all with grace and dignity, you will be genuinely rewarded.”

“Who I am is all of my dreams, experiences, innate talents, and acquired skills. . . . It is the color of my skin, my cultural background, my gender. All of these make me unique. . . .”
Prior to joining Columbia Law School, Petal served as Senior Director and Strategic Advisor for Legal Recruiting at Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP. She began her legal career as a corporate associate at the law firm of Shearman & Sterling LLP. She is a frequent speaker on several topics, including the realities of legal practice/law firm life, managing law firm recruiting programs, the importance of diversity in the legal workplace, interview preparation, transitioning from lawyer to law firm executive, and communicating effectively.
If you had told Esther Rodriguez, Firm Wide Entry-Level Recruiting Manager for Holland & Knight, 30 years ago that she would be doing what she does today, she would not have believed you. Esther has been with Holland & Knight for close to 20 years and began with the firm as a secretary in the recruiting department. Within a few years she was promoted to recruiting coordinator, and, as the firm’s national and international expansion kicked into gear in the late 1990s, she was further promoted to her present position.

Esther defines diversity as “differences in background, perspective, etc., that enrich our lives.” She adds, “It is an opportunity for understanding, a platform for acceptance.” On a personal level, for Esther, it has meant that she, a woman born in Cuba, could immigrate to the U.S., work in a national law firm, and become a contributing member of NALP. Over the years Esther has provided many volunteer hours to NALP and has served as a member of the Employment Diversity and Opportunity and Attorney Development and Evaluation Committees, as a Southeast Regional Coordinator, as Co-Chair of the 2005 NALP Annual Education Conference, as a NALP Director; and, most recently, as Vice-Chair of the NALP Nominating Committee.

She recalls that, back in 1990 when she began with Holland & Knight, the law firm world was still a male-dominated field. Most of the partners were male, and it was hard for women and otherwise diverse attorneys to advance. They weren’t given the same opportunities, and the type of work they were given wasn’t the type of work anyone wanted to do. Moreover, they were not given the challenging assignments or taken seriously when opportunities for advancement were presented. Today, the legal profession generally, and law firms specifically, are full of talented attorneys from varied backgrounds.

Esther believes that in today’s world, because law firms serve a diverse clientele, it is paramount that the lawyers and staff share an appreciation for the value in people’s differences. She sees her professional role in recruiting as being a gateway to providing opportunities for those who are willing to work hard to succeed at her firm, regardless of their diverse background.

She considers herself, as a Hispanic woman, to be a good example of a diverse individual. She recalls that, interestingly, after she had been in the recruiting coordinator position for awhile, her boss told her that he never thought she was going to succeed in that role and was glad that she had proven him wrong. One of the advantages her diversity has given her is an openness and
appreciation for differences, as well as an inclusive mindset. Any challenge she has faced has been an opportunity for growth. Her biggest challenges have been adapting to changes in management. Yet, Esther’s experience with this has been that building trusting relationships with management ultimately helps in making your case for change.

On the topic of mentoring, Esther defines a mentor as “somebody who is willing to share their knowledge and give generously of their time.” She considers the late Chesterfield Smith, one of Holland & Knight’s founding partners, to have been “everything you would want a mentor to be,” she recalls. She adds, “He was totally for the advancement of the associate.” Esther has also found that NALP members have been wonderful for providing guidance and thinks that they are a great resource that is often forgotten.

With regard to advice for new members, Esther feels that they should not hesitate to reach out to NALP when help and guidance are needed. In addition, whenever possible, they should attend the NALP conferences and get involved in a section or work group. She has found that NALP is full of talented individuals who are always willing to share their knowledge and provide guidance, and this is the best way to get to know them.
Grace E. Speights
Partner, Labor & Employment Practice Group at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP

By Nicole Horne White

When one hears the name Grace Speights, one may think of her many legal achievements, including being named by Washingtonian magazine as one of “Washington’s 100 Most Powerful Women” for 2009, and being listed in The Best Lawyers in America for the past four years. Not only is she a successful Labor & Employment partner for Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP, but she’s also a diversity leader. An African-American woman partner, Grace is the chair of her firm’s Complex Employment Litigation Practice; the Managing Partner of the Washington, DC office; and the co-chair of the firm’s Diversity Committee, a position that reports directly to the chair of the firm. And just how did Grace accomplish her goals, overcome challenges, and dispel stereotypes? She worked hard, engaged in her practice, and developed relationships within the legal industry.

Considered a “lifer,” except for a two-year federal court clerkship, Grace has spent her entire legal career at Morgan Lewis. “My goal and intent was to come to Morgan Lewis, be the best that I could be, do the best job that I could do, and hopefully that would mean success.” When she joined the firm’s litigation practice in the mid 1980s, she was one of only two African-American associates at the firm. At the time, there was just one African-American lateral partner, which was not unusual when Grace joined the legal profession in Washington, DC. She recalls, “At the time that I came into the firm, at least in major firms, the number of African-American partners was [around] 3 to 5% … and I’m talking about major firms, at least in DC.”

The firm’s lack of diversity was not a hindrance to Grace’s success as a lawyer. “It was a little intimidating, but I was prepared.” After being the first in her family to graduate from high school, Grace attended the University of Pennsylvania for her undergraduate degree and then went on to The George Washington University Law School and did quite well at both institutions. “I came into [the firm] recognizing that I had a lot to learn,” she says, “but I also came in confident in my ability to work hard.” She took a lot of initiative and did not just sit back and have assignments given to her. She engaged with the people who were delegating the assignments.

For Grace, being mentored carried a great deal of significance. The fact that the one African-American partner at the firm was in another office did not stop her from seeking advice and guidance. “He [made] sure that I was progressing and that I was getting the right assignments.” In addition, she sought out role models outside the firm through African-American bar associations...
like the National Bar Association. “Even though those partners were not at my firm, they took it upon themselves to reach out to me to make sure that things were going okay.” Grace made it a priority to build relationships within the firm as well and had mentors both inside and outside the firm. In her view, “Mentors are a must.”

Elevated to partnership in the early 1990s, Grace became very involved in recruitment and management, including serving as the hiring partner in DC from 1994 to 1998. But success did not come without its obstacles. “Being a woman and being African-American, at least when I started, I am sure that there were people and clients who may not have thought that I was as competent as my colleagues. But, you work hard and you don’t let that affect you and you show folks that you can do just as well as anybody else.” As a practicing Labor & Employment attorney today, many of her clients view her diverse background as an attribute. For instance, when handling employment discrimination cases, some cases have merit and some cases do not. Given her unique background, she believes that she brings a different perspective to the subject matter than a non-diverse person.

As she became more senior, taking on various leadership roles, Grace never forgot the impact her support network had on her development. Today, she makes every effort to give back and mentor junior attorneys, especially diverse associates. As an Office Managing Partner, she makes sure that the diverse attorneys are fully included and feel involved in the workings of the office. As the chair of the Complex Employment Litigation practice group, she ensures that diverse lawyers and paralegals get opportunities to work with important clients. “It’s very important for those of us in major law firms who are diverse to make sure that we mentor and try and improve diversity within the firm.” She continues, “I think that our diverse associates look up to our diverse partners, and I think we have an obligation to assist them on this long road.”

There is no doubt that diversity played an important role in Grace’s career, and she embraces it in her practice and leadership roles. Diversity to her means “making sure that no matter what people look like, no matter what background people come from, no matter what country people come from, to make sure that they feel like they are included in the fabric of whatever we’re doing.”
Jennifer Thomas

Director of Legal Recruiting at the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia

By Elvera M.A. Pollard and Melanie Priddy

Jennifer Thomas took a fairly circuitous path to her current role as Director of Legal Recruiting for the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia (PDSDC). Yet her background as a public interest attorney, advisor for new attorneys in public service jobs, law school career counselor, and advocate for equal justice made her a perfect fit for this position that she has held for the past eight years.

“I never had a career path, ”Jennifer explains. “I had simply followed opportunities that seemed interesting to me.” Her current position Jennifer admits, allows her to marry her zeal for public interest law with a desire to “do-over” her unhappy law school experience by enlightening students as to what an exciting and satisfying career public interest law can be.

Diversity plays a very large role in Jennifer’s current position as Director of Legal Recruiting in that it is one of the PDSDC’s goals in hiring. Jennifer observes that “Diversity … makes us a better law office … in part because it brings different experiences, voices and viewpoints to the table.” It also has the added benefit of reflecting their clientele — the majority of the office’s clients are African-American males. She adds, “I think it serves a valuable purpose when clients see that their attorneys, not only support staff, look like they do.”

Jennifer sees diversity in a very broad sense — a definition that was expanded even further after a NALP workshop several years ago. In this workshop, the leader of the session did a “step back/step forward” exercise that demonstrated how everyone had their advantages and disadvantages, many of which go perhaps unrecognized. “She had us step forward, for example, if we were raised in a household where we knew we were loved, or if there were more than two books in the house.” Jennifer recalls, “I found it revelatory.”

Since Jennifer started as an Elder Law attorney in Montgomery County, Maryland in 1993, she has seen large changes in the diversity landscape of the legal industry. Describing the early days of her career, Jennifer says, “I hardly ever saw an attorney of color in the courthouse.” In contrast, in her current position at the PDSDC Jennifer observes that they have a “critical mass of African-American lawyers, of lesbian lawyers, of women lawyers — it makes for a supportive and truly enjoyable environment.”
When asked how her own diversity may have posed challenges or disadvantages, Jennifer acknowledges that she does not think that her diversity has impacted the development of her career in ways that she easily recognizes. She attributes this to the fact that people sometimes are not fully conscious of biased decisions or can be more sophisticated about hiding decisions they make about people based on race, gender, etc. “That doesn’t mean I don’t feel slighted at times,” Jennifer adds, “but I think everyone has those experiences, so in that I’m certainly not a minority.”

Jennifer explains that mentors have had a significant role in her professional development and that she has had the good fortune to have a wide variety of them. “I consider myself lucky to have several mentors who are male, female, straight, gay, Black, white and Asian-Pacific,” she observed. Even further, some of her current mentors are much younger attorneys who work at PDSDC. The best mentors, she advises, are those that “have my best interests at heart and who are willing to share their opinions.”

Her best advice to new members of NALP, and advice that she herself was guilty of not following is to be assertive. “I should have done a better job of reaching out to find like-minded people who could have helped me adjust to the organization,” she recalls, “I should have been more aggressive about joining committees and taking advantage of other opportunities that were there the entire time.” Her final words of wisdom: “New members should definitely reach out — come and find me!”
Josh Wayser
Litigation Partner at Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP

By Melanie Priddy

When asked about how he came to be a litigation partner in the Los Angeles office of Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP, Josh Wayser is very succinct in his analysis. “I worked hard in law school, did very well, got a prestigious clerkship [on the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York], a good job offer … and ended up in the bankruptcy and insolvency group, just by default,” he says. Several years later, he found his way to Katten in June of 2008, where his practice is thriving. Yet that doesn’t take into account the numerous other activities in which he is involved. They include Josh’s role as the past president of the Beth Chayim Chadashim Synagogue, the first gay and lesbian synagogue in the country. He also volunteers for the Gay and Lesbian Legal Services Clinic and is co-chair of Katten’s GLBT Coalition.

With all of his diverse involvements, when asked what role diversity plays in his current position, Josh acknowledges that it plays a significant but understated role. “What I mean by that,” he explains, “is that some of my clients in-house are gay, so that’s a natural contact and bond between us … but most of my clients and in-house lawyers that I deal with … are straight, but they appreciate my diverse family and unusual personal story.” Josh’s diverse family includes his partner and his six adopted children of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. His favorite story of how this can impact his work involves showcasing diversity in an unusual, but effective way. “I represent a midwestern bank, very conservative,” Josh recalls. “I sent the head of the bank my holiday card with all of my kids on it, and he kept it on his desk and showed it to every single person that works at that bank that works with me. It was great because it was diversity marketing without having to do anything.”

Like many other diverse attorneys, Josh remembers the diversity landscape being very barren at the beginning of his legal career over 20 years ago. “There was no landscape. It was awful. It was very difficult in the early ‘80s. Quietly, I was out, and it was a problem at [my firm]. It wasn’t a core value at law firms back then from what I could tell.” More than 20 years later, Josh observes that while many firms pay lip service to the importance of diversity, the actual numbers have not changed very much. “If you look at every major law firm in the Am Law 100’s website, either on their initial page or on their first page that you might click to, you will see some reported commitment to diversity, but the numbers don’t back it up.” He continues, “The stated commitment is there, but I’m not sure … that the diverse lawyers have been as successful as they could have been.”
Like many attorneys, Josh attributes much of his success to having a mentor. “I had one mentor who is a friend and a lesbian, and she kind of helped me navigate the landscape,” Josh notes. But he has observed that diverse lawyers do not do a good enough job — or law firms in general do not do a good enough job — in finding mentors for other people. Mentors are crucial because, as Josh emphasizes, every law firm is a system. “It has its own rules, and how you get ahead is to have some guidance. Otherwise, you could be doing something wrong without realizing it and jeopardizing your chances.”

So how should attorneys go about finding mentors and what should they look for? “Someone who is successful,” Josh advises, “someone whom you can emulate and someone who knows how to get ahead.” In keeping with his earlier statement that a law firm is a system, Josh emphasizes that the associates who get ahead are those who figure out (or are advised) on the rules very early. “I liken being an associate to being in a beauty pageant. You have to win over all the judges, and you have to play the game.... I mean you have to have the underlying skill set, but so much of it is how you package yourself and how you respond to people and interact with people. Are you seen as a go-to person?”

Josh’s one piece of take-away advice? “Always be better than everyone else,” he suggests. While that may seem easier said than done, at the end of the day, Josh emphasizes that lawyers are in a service industry, and when and how young associates respond, whether it is to the partners or clients, is crucial. “Always [be] available, always [be] helpful [and] always [be] knowledgeable. [Y]ou have to build your brand.”
Final Words of Wisdom

The Diversity Leadership Work Group asked the Diversity Leaders we profiled to share highlights of the successes they have had and the challenges they have faced in their own organizations. We also asked these leaders to share some best practices and tips for dealing with challenges or resistance to advancing diversity in their respective workplaces. We let the interviewees know these additional observations beyond their profiles would be collected and shared in the aggregate without attribution to encourage open sharing.

Overall Success Factors & Best Practices For Gaining Buy-In

Not surprisingly, management involvement and support was the most frequently mentioned factor for success of diversity programs and initiatives. “It is vitally important to identify a Diversity Champion among the partnership,” stated one interviewee. “That champion has to be among the firm’s leadership and someone who is able to effectuate change, …get things done, [and] be available.”

A few firms, our Diversity Leaders observed, have demonstrated this commitment by hiring a dedicated diversity professional. One organization held a partner meeting dedicated specifically to diversity with clients and outside consultants, and includes building diverse teams as one area in their process of upward review of partners by associates.

The Diversity Leaders found affinity group programs to have significant potential for success. “Our diversity affinity group program has given our diverse attorneys in particular a sense of connection to the firm. These groups provide them with an opportunity to exercise and hone leadership skills; [and] empower them to be more engaged in other aspects of the firm [such as] recruiting, mentoring, and giving them a forum to roll out ideas.”

In order to gain buy-in from decision makers, it may be important to explain the “why” behind an initiative, and provide hard numbers and facts as well as options. Our Diversity Leaders encourage NALP members working in diversity to keep communication open and to cultivate allies within management and relevant departments.

Rather than taking direct credit for successful initiatives, one interviewee tries to work behind the scenes and create roles for others to assume visible leadership and responsibility for diversity successes. “Give them a sense of responsibility and a set of modest objectives, and then achieve that objective and really praise that person and acknowledge their role in achieving [it]… I think no diversity and inclusion initiative can be successful at a firm unless there truly is a sense that this is important for all of us.”
Another common theme for success in creating buy-in is answering client demand and demonstrating that diversity makes monetary sense. “View diversity as sound business marketing, as a way to make more money. I think if we talk about diversity in terms of dollars and moving the ball forward in terms of money, that’s a language … that managing partners in law firms can get.… [T]hey understand that by supporting diversity, they are supporting the bottom line.”

Challenges & Troubleshooting Tips

Challenges mentioned by our Diversity Leaders include convincing some partners of the value of diversity and addressing preconceived notions about diversity. “Especially in light of the downturn in the economy, there are people who question, now that companies are facing difficult times, is diversity really an imperative anymore. We are confident, and I am confident, that diversity remains an imperative for most companies, at least companies we do business for. And so, making sure, despite all of the bad times that we are going through, making sure that diversity remains high on everyone’s list is a challenge.”

How do our Diversity Leaders suggest dealing with such challenges or resistance? By consistently making diversity a regular part of the process and through thoughtful, convincing and direct communication. One interviewee’s approach includes engaging senior leaders; using powers of persuasion and diplomacy to get people to understand and embrace diversity; engaging more people to share the message and the work, and selecting those who already have credibility within the firm.

Another related, “Sometimes successfully, sometimes not, [I have dealt with it] by having very direct conversations with people. They may not happen right away or when an issue first gets raised, but eventually I’m just taking the opportunity to pull people aside and say, ‘Let’s have a discussion. I want to hear and understand what your thoughts are around this particular subject. You know this particular issue when it came up in dealing with this one person. What are some of your thoughts and feelings around this? Here are my thoughts and feelings.’”