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Taylor's Perspective . . .

Tennessee Law Firm to Launch Diversity Outreach Program at Undergraduate Level

From the Editors

As of this writing, it's less than a month from Election Day 2008, and by the time most of you read this, we'll know who won the presidency. While Barack Obama seems to be leading John McCain, anything can happen. If voters elect Obama, many citizens, politicians, and pundits alike will say that America has taken a monumental step away from its racist history and toward equality. Clearly, it would be a remarkable achievement for Barack and Michelle Obama, of course, but also for millions of Americans.

Right now, in early October, we don't know. But we do know one thing. The ugly face of racism has surfaced throughout the campaign: Too many people continue to say they simply can't bring themselves to vote for an African American; a major national magazine darkened a cover photo of Obama; in what some reports called "lynch-mob tones," members of a crowd at a Sarah Palin rally screamed "Kill him!" in reference to the Democratic candidate; a life-size cardboard effigy of Obama was hung from a tree at a small Oregon college. The list goes on.

Yes, regardless of the outcome on November 4, the United States still has a long way to go to overcome racism. To its well-deserved credit, the legal profession has helped to break the cycle of discrimination and encourage diversity, especially during the last several years. Law firms are truly making efforts—and often, headway—in diversifying their ranks so that their partnerships really do "look like America," as the phrase goes.

Law firms are also spending resources by hiring or promoting specialists to help. Consider a study last year by Newton Square, PA-based consultancy Altman Weil in conjunction with the Minority Corporate Counsel Association. Its findings showed that 50 percent of

the firms participating in the study have a designated diversity manager position, which is an increase of 5.4 percent from the previous year. What's more, some 96 percent of participating firms have a diversity committee, up by three percent from 2006.

Deeper into the Pipeline

Many law firms send their attorneys to law schools to advise and recruit minority students. Some law firms go deeper into the educational system to reach out. For example, Philadelphia's Saul Ewing and three Wilmington, DE, firms recently helped sponsor a program by Widener University School of Law to introduce minority undergraduate students to law school and the legal profession. We applaud these initiatives; every outreach effort helps, at least a little.

But we've heard of no program like the innovative one that will roll out in early 2009 from the law offices of Memphis-based Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz. The pilot program is being called Bringing Back Diversity Boldly from our Colleges to our Businesses (BBDBCB) College Outreach Program. (It's a verbose title, but a promising program.)

Essentially, Baker Donelson is sending attorneys to two different colleges to conduct relatively comprehensive question-and-answer seminars with undergrads about law school and legal careers. (They've yet to decide which two colleges to visit but have narrowed the list to Miles College in Birmingham, AL, Alabama State University, Tennessee State University, and the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.)

The BBDBCB initiative supplements the firm's successful diversity scholarship program. "When we thought

out the parameters of that program, we realized, yes, this is tailored to law schools, but we need to go deeper into the pipeline of students,” says Marlene Bidelman-Dye, co-chair of the undergrad program (the other co-chair is Natalie Bolling). “It came to our attention that maybe we should start tapping into women and minorities in the colleges because sometimes people don’t think of law school when they’re in college.”

One of the objectives of the college outreach effort is to change stereotypical perceptions of the legal profession and offer undergrads a clear picture of career options. “A lot of people think of the practice of law as what they see on ‘Law & Order,’” Bidelman-Dye says. “So we want to explain that the practice of law is more than that. It’s legislature, teaching, business representation, family law, etc. We want to expose students to all the options that a JD brings to the table.”

The Baker Donelson attorneys intend to make the prospect of applying for and attending law school less daunting, as it is for many, if not most, college students. “Eventually, we want to walk students through the law-school application process,” Bidelman-Dye says, “and help them find grants and scholarships, because it can be pretty frightening if you don’t have help with that.” The firm hopes to create and nurture relationships with young students “that will help feed them into law schools and eventually into our law offices,” she adds.

We think that the program is ambitious, creative, and admirable. Let’s hope that it succeeds.

Others observers are not so sanguine about the outreach effort.

“I think it’s a real long shot,” says an East Coast consultant who asked not to be identified. “It’s absurd to think that you can shepherd people over that amount of time, particularly in a marketplace like ours where people are making so many choices so quickly. I think it’s a nice gesture by the firm, but I’d be surprised if, deep down inside, they actually expect this to produce

results. I can’t believe that the firm truly expects to gain one single important hire as a result of this.”

For Business and the Common Good

The consultant may be right, but we think that it’s more than just a “nice gesture.” Too many college students don’t have the kind of help that Baker Donelson is about to offer. When career professionals do reach out to help undergrads, many of those students remember. Will they go to law school, remain loyal to the firm that helped get them there, summer intern with Baker Donelson, eventually join the partnership, and help to further diversify its attorney ranks? Maybe. Maybe not.

The important thing is that the firm is communicating to those in need and keeping diversity, as so many say these days, “top of mind.” The firm’s leadership has a strong track record in this arena. “Ben Adams [the firm’s CEO] and Jerry Stauffard [its chief operating officer] are incredible leaders on the diversity front,” Bidelman-Dye says. “They’ve carried their commitment to diversity from the top down.”

That commitment is important for altruistic reasons—diversity should indeed be sought—but also because it fosters better business relations. “Not only are our clients diverse, many of them are demanding diversity from their counsel,” Bidelman-Dye adds. “[Diversification] is the smart business thing to do. And it encourages better creativity. With diversity, you get people who have different attributes to help solve problems.”

History has shown that it’s not easy to break down barriers that minorities encounter everyday. This program aims to do just that. We wish it, the law firm, and, most of all, the students that it reaches the very the best. ■

—Steven T. Taylor

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