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Legal Diversity Council's Efforts Showing Promise

Karen Sloan, The National Law Journal

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The law firm managing partners and Fortune 500 general counsel who formed the Leadership Council for Legal Diversity in 2009 hoped to see measurable improvement in the profession's diversity within a decade.

Now a survey suggests those hopes are being realized. Specifically, early participants in the council's three programs reported relatively low attrition rates at their law firms, deeper professional networks and high employment rates among diverse law students.

"It's starting to move the needle," said Microsoft Corp. general counsel Brad Smith, chairman of the council. "We always knew we couldn't change the legal profession in a year, but the early results are positive."

The council was founded on the premise that the most effective way to boost diversity within the profession was to involve its leaders, identify promising diverse attorneys and provide them with career tools they need to succeed.

The council operates three programs: a yearlong fellows program, designed to encourage midcareer attorneys to assume professional leadership roles; a scholars program that puts first-year law students to work for the council's member firms and legal departments; and a mentorship program that pairs diverse law students with working attorneys.

More than 600 attorneys with eight to 10 years of experience have gone through the fellows program, more than 500 law students have participated in the scholars programs and more than 2,000 law students have been mentored thus far.

The council tapped American Bar Foundation director Robert Nelson to survey participants. Among his findings was that one-third of the fellows reported referring work to other fellows. "The fact that they are referring is an indicator that a level of trust is being built among the members of this unique community," he said.

Additionally, the effort helps combat the social isolation that studies have shown hinders minorities and women at law firms. "This network has given people a way to address that social isolation in the workplace," Smith said. "Having a trusted network has made a difference in their careers. There is a strong desire among diverse attorneys to find ways to connect and help each other succeed."

Nearly a quarter of the surveyed fellows had been promoted by their organizations during the past year and 35 percent moved into leadership positions, Nelson found.

The initial cohort of 1L scholars in 2011 was small—just nine students—but each one landed a full-time job that required a law degree; the rate was 64 percent for law graduates overall. Among the larger group of scholars who have yet to graduate, 100 percent landed summer jobs following their second year in law school.

The council has 221 firm and legal department members and hopes to expand to 250 in the near future, Smith said.

“We have seen some early successes in our first five years,” said General Mills general counsel Rick Palmore, who helped found the council. “But we are even more ambitious for the next five years.”

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