A Friendly Ear: New Mentoring Program Pairs Students with Practitioners—And Everyone Benefits

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A friendly ear
New mentoring program pairs students with practitioners — and everyone benefits

The Beatles put it into words, but everyone knew it already: It’s a whole lot easier to get by with a little help from your friends.

With that in mind, UB Law School last spring began a wide-ranging mentoring program that has drawn national attention in the National Jurist magazine. Each member of the first-year class was matched with a mentor — a practicing lawyer or judge, more than 200 in all. Students and mentors were matched according to their interests, and the relationship is expected to continue throughout their law school years.

The mentoring program began when alumnus Robert Conklin ‘68 saw that a mentor had been provided for his son, a medical student, and suggested UB Law might benefit from such an arrangement as well. After suggesting the idea at a Dean’s Advisory Council meeting, Conklin soon joined forces with fellow alumnus James Gerlach ‘97, an officer of the UB Law Alumni Association, and Sheri L. Mooney ’96, immediate past president of the Western New York Chapter of the Women’s Bar Association of the State of New York. Mooney had run the Western New York Chapter’s mentoring program for several years. Along with several members of the Law School’s professional staff, the three became active volunteer leaders on the committee that helped to run UB Law’s mentoring program.

Mooney says her own experience of having a mentor through WBAWSNY when she was a law student inspired her to help. “One of the things it provided was a voice from the legal community, somebody who was actually in practice with whom I could talk about application of the law,” says Mooney, whose mentor back then was Ginger D. Schroder ’90. “Through Ginger, I had a direct connection to the Buffalo legal market and someone who was looking out for my best interests. She was able to give me guidance on various job opportunities, career directions, and various practice areas.”

The relationship benefits both parties, says Mooney, whose current mentee is law student Christian Brockway ’05. “The mentors are usually accessible and interested in pursuing the relationship,” Mooney says. “The students become increasingly more interested the longer they are in law school. Their questions become more complex as they approach the big decisions that have to be made with respect to choosing a career path.

“Female law students often want to talk to female attorneys about work-life balance issues. A common question is: How do you balance your practice with family concerns?”

For her part, Brockway finds it helpful to have a resource in the world of working lawyers. “It is very useful to me to have someone who is practicing to whom I can ask questions,” she says. Though the school discourages using the program as a placement tool, having a mentor helps to build a network of contacts. “The mentoring program is partly a networking thing,” Brockway acknowledges. “It is nice to know that we have a contact who probably knows someone who works in a particular area and knows what my options are.”

“I wish I had had a mentor when I was in law school,” says Lisa Bloch Rodwin ’85, who mentors student Amanda Warner ’05. Rodwin says, “It is very rewarding for me, and benefits both of us. I enjoy hearing her perspective as a young lawyer-to-be.

“We discuss everything from issues that arise at work and at school, to different options she might have for a summer job next year, the pros and cons of gov-
different course selections, different locations for her future practice, and the pros and cons of staying in Buffalo versus going someplace else. Rodwin says the program also helps to ensure the quality of lawyers who are the next generation of the Western New York legal community. "It takes some time," she says, "but it is time well spent, because many of these lawyers will be settling in our community. These students are our legal future. You can help mold somebody by responding to their needs."

"Lisa was a great source of advice," Warner says. "I had a summer internship in the public interest law sector, and we would talk about how that was going. We frequently discussed the differences between public interest law and private practice. She has been a terrific contact person for me." Warner says she is not put off by the intensity of her mentor's work. (Rodwin runs the domestic violence bureau of the Erie County district attorney's office.) "I am really fascinated by what she does. I just know that it is not for me," Warner says.

"One of the conversations we had was about the trade-offs, with the amount of money you make and also the amount of time you put in, and how to balance having a life outside your career. Lisa has a lot to say about that."

For mentor Diane Bosse '76, the program "presents a wonderful opportunity for people in the profession to impart the values of the profession to law students and to help them to understand the culture of the profession. I have two mentees. We have had some great discussions about good-faith obligations in the discovery process. We have talked about how lawyers spend their days, about issues related to classes, professors, other students, client development, and the insecurities we have all had as law students — topics that relate to law school and the profession. It is a lot of fun for me, as a lawyer somewhat removed from the Law School, to revisit some of the same concerns I once had."

"The issue of time isn't a big one," Bosse says. "We meet in the office or on the phone," she says. "To let them know that you are available is probably one of the most important things."