Four Weeks of Discovery: Opening Undergraduates' Eyes to the Possibilities of Law

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol26/iss1/18
Tweny academically promising college students spent a month at SUNY Buffalo Law School this summer, but it was far from a vacation. As part of the LSAC Discover-Law.org Prelaw Undergraduate Scholars Program, the students took notes on lectures in legal theory and practice, completed some written projects, tried out oral advocacy, took field trips ranging from a law firm to a prison, and in general got a foretaste of the life of a first-year law student.

The innovative program, one of nine nationwide sponsored by the Law School Admissions Council, is intended to attract minority applicants to the field of law. In Buffalo, the program was a joint venture of the Law School, UB’s Millard Fillmore College, the Minority Bar Association of Western New York and LSAC.

“It is intended to address the lack of diversity in law schools and the need for more students of diverse backgrounds in the pipeline,” says Lillie Wiley-Upshaw, SUNY Buffalo Law’s vice dean for admissions and student life and one of the leaders of the program. “We tried to give the students a realistic snapshot of what it’s like to be a law student and a practitioner. Now they are much better prepared to be smart applicants and hopefully become stronger law students once they are admitted.”

A typical day, starting at 9 o’clock sharp, involved a class on a topic in law, an intensive course on the fundamentals of legal research and writing, a seminar on the law school admissions process or skill development for the LSAT, and a guest speaker. After dinner, students were expected to study and prepare for the next day’s classes.

Faculty participants included Professor James A. Wooten, teaching Introduction to Law; Professor Teresa A. Miller, teaching Introduction to Criminal Procedure; Professor Charles P. Ewing, teaching Evidence and Trial Practice; Professor David M. Engel, teaching Tort Law; and Law in Culture and Society; and lecturers Bernadette Gargano and Johanna Oreskovic ’97, teaching legal research and writing. In addition, students toured Wendler Correctional Facility, networked with attorneys at the Buffalo office of Hodgson Russ (which hosted a reception for the students along with Jodyann Galvin ’98), and toured Family Court and Buffalo’s downtown federal courthouse.

The students worked hard. “We tried to simulate the first-year experience as much as we could,” Wiley-Upshaw says – “that feeling of being overwhelmed and having to read material more than once if you don’t understand it the first time.” And, she said, “We tried very hard to communicate to their professors that they didn’t need to hold back.”

The students stayed in the newly built Greiner Hall, under the watchful eyes of two resident assistants, third-year SUNY Buffalo Law students Amber Diem and Paul Iya.

Tasha E. Moore ’98, regional director of the Buffalo office of the New York State Division of Human Rights, led a Minority Bar Association task force that has produced programs for potential lawyers of all ages – from grade school to college – to improve the diversity of the profession. Those efforts have ranged from staging “the trial of Goldilocks” for younger children, to running a speaker series for high school students, to the Discover Law program for minority and first-generation college students.

“We wanted them to have an idea of what it truly takes to become a lawyer,” says Moore, who is immediate past president of the Minority Bar Association. “A lot of young people don’t view the legal professional as accessible, and that’s particularly true for minority students. We wanted to show them that you don’t need to be wealthy to get through law school. Graduate education, including law school, is expensive, but there are ways to make it happen.”

Discover Law, she says, was an experiment – “at first we were concerned no one would apply,” she says – but quickly drew interest from over 100 applicants. “We could have doubled the class easily, but it was a good beginning class and a good learning experience for both of us,” Moore says.

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