Discoverlaw Grant Renewal: Opening the Doors of the Legal Profession to More Students of Color

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DiscoverLaw grant renewal

Opening the door of the legal profession to more students of color

SUNY Buffalo Law School’s award-winning initiative to attract underrepresented minority students into the legal profession will continue for a fourth year.

Lillie Wiley-Upshaw, vice dean for admissions and student life, announced the extension, which comes in response to a grant by the Law School Admission Council. LSAC had initially funded the program for three years, but was able to extend that funding for one more session.

Targeting students of color who have completed one or two years of college, the DiscoverLaw program is helping to diversify law school classes, and later the profession, one promising young person at a time.

In the program, 20 students live on the University at Buffalo’s North Campus for a month over the summer, and earn a $900 stipend to offset income they might otherwise have earned during that time. They take four rigorous courses taught by SUNY Buffalo Law professors, attend field trips to see the law in action, learn about the admissions process, and shadow a judge or attorney for a day.

Other curricular highlights include intensive seminars on the law school admissions process and skill development for the LSAT; tours of correctional facilities and courthouses; a resume writing workshop; and an ethnographic research project, in which the students interviewed people of various ethnicities about their views of the law, and explored their own experience and identity through journaling. Students also have been matched with volunteer mentors.

The students have come from as far as Atlanta and Wisconsin, though preference is given to applicants from western and central New York, northeastern Pennsylvania and eastern New York.

It’s an initiative that has proved effective and now has drawn statewide notice. SUNY Buffalo Law was honored March 30 in New York City by the New York Law Journal, whose Diversity Initiative Project 2015 recognizes commitment to creating a diverse legal community and sustained efforts to reach that goal. The legal publication honored “law firms and legal organizations that confronted barriers to attracting, training, retaining or supporting diverse talent, and created realistic initiatives to overcome those obstacles and provide ongrowing opportunities for growth and advancement.”

“We are deeply grateful and humbled to receive one more year of funding,” Wiley-Upshaw says. “We are very proud of the students who have participated in our program and so very excited to have the opportunity to host the program for one more summer. We are hopeful that we will be able to raise the necessary funds to do it on our own in 2016.”

Kent D. Lollis, LSAC’s executive director for diversity initiatives, said about 18 law schools nationwide have participated in the DiscoverLaw initiative since its inception in 2002.

Besides SUNY Buffalo Law, the law schools of the University of Arkansas and the University of Texas-Austin will take part in the program in 2015. In Buffalo, the Minority Bar Association of Western New York is a co-sponsor.

“It’s a real commitment,” Lollis says, “and I admire the schools that have done it. It’s one of the most labor-intensive programs we sponsor. We’re very pleased with the program overall, and we wouldn’t have made this offer if SUNY Buffalo’s program had not been effective according to our evaluation standards. I know that the school has been eager to secure additional funding to operate the program over the long term.”

Karen R. Kaczmarski ’89, associate dean for development, says SUNY Buffalo Law is hoping to continue the program with alternative funding. “The Law School has been working closely with key alumni and friends to obtain financial support from individual donors, corporations and foundations to ensure the continuation of the program, and all donations are welcomed and appreciated,” she says. For information or to make a donation, contact Kaczmarski at (716) 645-6429 or krkacz@buffalo.edu.

The Law School is currently accepting applications for the DiscoverLaw program starting June 2015. Applications are available at www.law.buffalo.edu.