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# Putting Thoughts Into Action: The Creation of the Latino/a Alumni Association of the Washington College of Law

**Keywords**

Latina/o Alumni Association, Washington College of Law

# PUTTING THOUGHTS INTO ACTION: THE CREATION OF THE LATINA/O ALUMNI ASSOCIATION OF THE WASHINGTON COLLEGE OF LAW

By Carlos Quintana\*

The process for establishing the Latina/o Alumni Association of the Washington College of Law (“LAAW”) began in the same way I suspect many great organizations got their start, over a few beers in a Washington, D.C. bar. Eight alumni (Maryam Ahranjani, Luis Clavijo, John Evanoff, Paul Figueroa, Juan Garcia, Manuel Garcia, Eric Garduño, and Carlos Quintana), first introduced to each other as part of the Latina/o Law Students Association at the Washington College of Law (“WCL”) from 2000 to 2002, met in the summer of 2005 to discuss an idea first conceived by Manuel Garcia (2000). The idea was part of a larger discussion with members of WCL’s Diversity Committee earlier in the year.

Specifically, the idea was to find a way for Latina/o alumni to help incoming Latina/o students at WCL avoid some of the pitfalls that awaited them as law students, and that frankly, many of us had fallen into during our years of study at WCL. We wanted to provide law students with practical advice on study and exam-taking techniques that worked well for us, as well as those that did not work so well. We also felt it was important to speak about other aspects of our law school experiences as Latina/o students, such as how we dealt with personal relationships (i.e., family, community, and partners), time management, financial hardships, and career choices. At its most basic, we wanted to share information about the things we wish someone had told us about law school before we started our law school careers.

## THE MOTIVATION

The potential impact of a Latina/o alumni association was crystallized for us after reading a report prepared by the American Bar Association (“ABA”) as part of a National Conference entitled, *Collaborating to Expand the Pipeline*. The conference took place in Houston, TX on November 3-5, 2005. Statistics in the report provided clear evidence of the challenges faced by minorities along the “pipeline” into the legal profession. Focusing on Latinas/os, the report found that in the fall of 2004, Latinas/os made up only 7.9% of all applicants to ABA-accredited law schools, compared with 65% for whites, 10.6% for blacks, and 8.6% for Asians. The report also showed that despite the fact that Latinas/os make up nearly 14% of the U.S. population, only about 4% of attorneys are Latinas/os. Finally, the report indicated that Latinas/os posted lower bar passage rates and higher law school attrition rates than their white counterparts.

These numbers were not surprising when you looked at con-

ditions further back in the pipeline. For example, a 2004 study by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard found that high school graduation rates for Latina/o students were only 53.2%, compared to 74.9% for whites. For Latinas/os that did go to college, only 6.3% received Bachelor of Science degrees conferred in Title IV degree-granting institutions, while 70% of whites received such degrees.

## THE MISSION

Upon reading the ABA’s report, we decided that LAAW could positively affect the pipeline at many levels. For example, LAAW could provide motivational speakers to elementary, high school, and college students and provide useful information about law school and legal careers. While recognizing the long term potential of the association, LAAW also realized that initially, our most valuable contribution would be assisting incoming students, current students, and alumni. However, we agreed that unlike typical alumni associations whose primary goal was to advance the careers and professional development of its alumni, mostly by creating networking opportunities, our primary focus was to give back to those who were following in our footsteps.

Therefore, as a first step in affecting the pipeline, we decided to devote our energies to creating a support network for Latina/o students that had succeeded in becoming law school applicants and/or students. Specifically, we decided that our mission would include improving the recruitment of Latina/o students and their retention and academic performance once they enrolled at WCL. We also determined that an effective support network would be made stronger by the presence of Latina/o faculty, so we decided to include recruitment of Latina/o professors into our mission.

Our guiding principle to help Latino/a law students at WCL was memorialized in the organization’s mission statement:

The Latina/o Alumni Association of the Washington College of Law (WCL) seeks to improve the academic performance of Latina/o students, strengthen and enhance recruitment and retention of Latina/o law students and faculty, and advocate for policies to achieve these goals at WCL. The Alumni Association also seeks to establish and maintain a sense of community and strong network for students and alumni.

## THE WORK

Having decided on our mission, we began discussing what would be the best mechanism for us to share our experiences and best practices with the incoming students. Initially, we talked about a summer program over the course of several weeks, a pre-law school boot camp, modeled on programs at UC Davis' King Hall Outreach Program, Charles Hamilton Houston Law School Preparatory Institute, the Sutherland Scholars training program administered by Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan, LLP in Atlanta, and Council on Legal Education Opportunity's College Scholars Program. Those programs were all intended to help improve the academic performance of minority students in law school, were at least six weeks long, and included intensive legal writing and exam taking preparation.

Although we liked the comprehensive nature of these programs, it soon became clear that they presented some real obstacles. For example, we would need to provide room and board for most of the students coming to Washington, D.C. The program might limit students' ability to earn much needed income in preparation for law school. Having a comprehensive program also ran the risk of burning students out before they even began their law school careers. Furthermore, LAAW was concerned about possible overlap with existing WCL programs that provided incoming students with workshops on legal writing and analysis, such as the "Legal Analysis Study Group."<sup>4</sup> Taking these realities into account, as well as the limited time availability of alumni, we decided in April 2006 that our best option would be to offer the students a one-day prep course that would focus strictly on providing practical advice. We titled the prep, "What I Wish I Would Have Known."

### THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

In addition to developing our mission statement and selecting the format for our introduction to incoming students, the association wrestled with the decision of whether to establish itself as non-profit 501(c)(3) association, versus a sub-division of WCL. At first, the idea of a non-profit organization affiliated with WCL had a lot of appeal; primarily, because it seemed to provide the most autonomy in developing what we considered to be a non-traditional alumni association. Consequently, we contacted the Black Alumni Association of WCL, which we learned was established as and remains a 501(c)(3), that mainly provides scholarships to black students at WCL. Jackie Jackson, the association's treasurer, provided some useful context as to their establishment and current activities, and provided us with a copy of their bylaws.

In February 2006, LAAW met with Trishana Bowden, Associate Dean of Development and Alumni Relations at WCL, to discuss the establishment of the association and potential affiliation with WCL. At the meeting, Trishana made clear that WCL was very excited about the establishment of the association and committed to supporting our mission. WCL also made clear their preference that the association exist within

the structure of the law school. To our surprise, the law school, currently, does not have an umbrella alumni association. WCL also expressed concern that as an independent organization, there could be a lack of coordination in fundraising efforts undertaken by LAAW and WCL. As a way to better assess how a potential affiliation with WCL might work in practice, WCL offered to support LAAW's efforts to put on a prep course for incoming students in the fall. The prep course was scheduled for August 16, 2006, and WCL suggested that we view this as a trial run for a possible partnership. The idea seemed reasonable to the alumni, and we agreed to proceed according to WCL's suggestion.

In August, WCL proved to be true to their word, providing not only classroom space and other logistical support for the prep course, but also agreeing to provide lunch for the students. In addition, prior to the prep course, WCL distributed LAAW's invitation to all incoming Latina/o students. As a result of our collaboration, the prep course was a great success, with twenty-eight incoming Latina/o 1Ls attending. During the prep course, alumni provided students with information about test taking skills, speaking with professors, dealing with family responsibilities, adjusting to life in Washington, D.C., and setting priorities. In addition, Professor Tony Varona, one of three Latino professors at WCL, provided the students with invaluable information about professor's expectations and participated in a mock professor-student dialogue. After the event, students filled out a survey of the prep course in which they unanimously praised the LAAW's effort and indicated that it was extremely useful.

By January 2007, although we had avoided discussion of a governing structure, the decision could not be put off any longer. As a practical matter, we needed to have a formal decision-making body and people to identify as representatives of the association for purposes of communicating with WCL, students, and the general public. Since in practice we had operated as an executive committee, consisting mostly of a core group of six alumni, we settled on an Executive Committee model. Via email, LAAW asked for volunteers to participate in the Committee and received responses from Maryam Ahranjani (2000), Manuel Garcia (2000), Eric Garduño, Juan Henao (2005), and Carlos Quintana (2000). One of the first items on the Committee agenda was to make a final decision on whether to affiliate within the structure of WCL or establish itself as a nonprofit. On January 12, 2007, the Executive Committee voted unanimously to affiliate with WCL. Based on the support provided by WCL in preparing the prep course, the decision to affiliate within the law school now seemed to be the obvious choice. Further, the experience made clear the advantage of having built-in access to WCL's facilities, communication network, and staff, among other valuable resources.

### THE INTRODUCTION

With the affiliation decision behind us, it was now time to plan a party as a means of celebrating the new partnership

## THE FUTURE

between WCL and its Latina/o alumni, as well as provide a tool to recruit new alumni members. The big event was scheduled to take place on April 12, 2007, at PepsiCo, Inc., a space secured by one of our members, Omar Vargas (1998).

In the meantime, on March 6, 2007, at WCL's Tenth Annual Hispanic Law Conference, LAAW formally announced its establishment. It was an especially proud moment for the association because it had recruited Professor Margaret Montoya to be the keynote speaker at the Conference. Professor Montoya, who is currently a professor at the University of New Mexico School of Law, and has the distinction of being the first Latina admitted to Harvard Law School, had been a supporter of the association since we began discussing its creation. During her presentation, she reminded us of why we consider her a great inspiration. She praised our efforts to establish the association. However, Professor Montoya also challenged the legal community to do more to improve diversity in the legal profession and to incorporate discussions of race, ethnicity, gender, and language into law school curriculums.

Looking ahead, LAAW is committed to becoming an integral part of WCL, including becoming an active participant in student and faculty recruitment processes and all aspects of alumni relations. LAAW will also continue to provide programmatic support for incoming and current Latina/o students by institutionalizing its prep course as an annual event in the fall, along with a spring follow-up. In addition, LAAW will collaborate with WCL in developing programs and activities for 2 and 3Ls, focusing on providing advice about the bar exam, networking, and career opportunities.

Furthermore, LAAW will soon begin fundraising efforts to provide book scholarships to incoming Latina/o 1Ls. Finally, LAAW will work with local Washington, D.C. organizations, including the Hispanic Bar of D.C., to encourage and facilitate opportunities for WCL Latina/o alumni and students to volunteer their time and skills to assisting underserved members of the Latino community. Activities like these will allow students and alumni the opportunity to give back to those that may be awaiting their turn in the pipeline to successful legal careers.

## ENDNOTES

\* Carlos Quintana is the Co-founder and an Executive Committee member of the LAAW. He wrote this piece with support from Paul Figueroa (2001) and Maryam Ahranjani (2001). Maryam is also a member of the Executive Committee, an Associate Director of the Program on Law and Government, and a Professorial Lecturer at WCL.

<sup>1</sup> American Bar Association Presidential Advisory Council on Diversity in the Profession, *The Critical Need to Further Diversity the Legal Academy & the Legal Profession* (October 2005), available at <http://www.abanet.org/op/pipelineconf/acdreport.pdf> (last visited Oct. 17, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Orefield Et Al., *LOSING OUR FUTURE: HOW MINORITY YOUTH ARE BEING LEFT BEHIND BY THE GRADUATION RATE CRISIS* (2004). A joint release by The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, the Urban Institute, Advocates for Children of New York, and the Civil Society Institute; available at [www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/](http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/) (last visited Oct. 17, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*