



To Increase Diversity, Law Firms Focus on Pipeline

Two years ago, Athena Ullah was working in a warehouse on the outskirts of Los Angeles and scraping by on government assistance despite holding a master's degree in city planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"I was holding a box cutter and walking to a grocery distribution warehouse with an MIT degree," said Ullah, who had applied for 137 jobs at law firms, government and corporations, before coming up empty-handed, and deciding to sell her only asset: a 2004 Volvo sedan that went for \$3,000.

"It was desperation ... I couldn't find work, and I was on the brink of being homeless, and I just needed something."

Today, Ullah is a fellow of Munger, Tolles & Olson, which is taking a new tack in its efforts to improve diversity in the legal profession: They're helping people from diverse backgrounds gain admission to top law schools and prepare them for a career as successful lawyers. What differs about this approach is it addresses the so-called "pipeline issue." By targeting potential students who have not even been accepted to law school, the firm is hoping that the talent will eventually come knocking at its doors after having obtained law degrees.

"If you look at California, and the state bar, I think a lot of people would like that bar to look more like the population it's serving," said Anjan Choudhury, one of two Munger Tolles partners who is spearheading the program. [\(Click here to read a Munger Tolles fellow's first-hand account of why he wants to become a lawyer.\)](#)

In 2006, Sidley Austin started a similar "pre-law" fellowship program. It provides \$2,500 for LSAT prep courses and registration fees for law school applications. There is also a \$2,500 scholarship for law students. It recruits candidates on college campuses across the country, and like Munger Tolles, both programs target people of diverse socio-economic, racial and gender backgrounds.

Craig Griffith, of Sidley, said his firm accepts roughly 30 fellows per year. He estimated that 75 percent of the roughly 200 fellows so far have graduated from law school. "The vast majority are lawyers working in big cities, working for the government, and there is a supreme court clerk in the group," Griffith said.

He added, "This is not a recruiting program to Sidley. We have no strings attached for commitment back to the firm. We don't have right of first refusal. This is really done to enhance the national pipeline of diverse legal talent."

The Munger Tolles program started eight years ago, in 2007, with just two to five fellows per year who worked at the firm as litigation analysts, essentially conducting research on cases. The fellows gained experience working at a prestigious law firm, and also received preparation for the law school application process.

In November 2014, the firm expanded the program to 40 fellows and modified the terms. Now, the yearlong program provides fellows a free LSAT preparation course, monthly classes on how to apply to and succeed in law school, and a network of peers and mentors to support them.

"I think all of us saw...there hasn't been enough of a gain," said Misty Sanford, co-head of Munger Tolles' diversity program. "We started to rethink the program and figure out whether there could be a broader impact."

Both Sidley and Munger Tolles started the programs amid persistent reports that suggest the legal industry lags in promoting diversity, as well as placing females and minorities in leadership positions. For instance, the American Lawyer found African Americans constituted only 1.9 percent of partners out of 223 law firms in a 2014 diversity report.

This past Saturday, Sanford, a Mexican American whose family members didn't go to college, told a small audience in Munger, Tolles & Olson's Los Angeles office that she scored poorly on the LSAT a dozen years ago. Her biggest problem was a lack of confidence—a self-imposed, mental roadblock that she feels many diverse law school applicants face.

“When I walked in and saw a bunch of people who looked like they belonged, and clearly came from families of lawyers and judges, they all looked so smart—it just got to me,” Sanford told Big Law Business.

“Nobody has really figured out how to really change things,” said Sanford. “This is our bid to trying to figure out a program that is going to have a deeper and broader impact than current programs.”

Griffith, of Sidley, said both the Sidley and Munger Tolles programs are an acknowledgment that the legal community as a whole needs greater diversity, and he acknowledged there are still hurdles: Books, tuition and the cost-of living make it difficult for some candidates to graduate law school.

Ullah, the MIT grad, acknowledged the financial challenges she faces in attending law school, but didn't seem fazed. Ullah said she wants to become a lawyer who specializes in public finance and debt, and has been cold-calling partners at law firms such as Nixon Peabody, O'Melveny & Myers and Stradling Yocca to set up meetings and cultivate a network.

“Our records indicate that 75 percent, maybe more, of [our] pre-law scholars are graduating from law school,” Griffith said. “You can stop right there and say that is a success.”