

BUILDING A BETTER LEGAL PROFESSION

Nina Schuyler

“Can we talk in five minutes?” says Andrew Canter in a rushed voice. Exactly five minutes later, the phone rings. “I had to finish my presentation to students at the UT [University of Texas] at Austin School of Law,” he says on his cell phone. Tomorrow, he’s off to Vanderbilt University Law School. Then next week, Harvard Law School and Yale Law School.



Andrew Canter

In fact, this fall he and a team of Stanford Law School students traveled to the top twenty to thirty law schools in the country, spreading the word about their organization, Building a Better Legal Profession, or BBLP, founded in 2007 by Stanford Law School students. Its purpose, as its name suggests, is to ensure that the practice of law does not mean giving up “a commitment to family, community, and dedicated service to client.”

Canter, one of the original founders and a former copresident, says today’s attendance at his forty-five-minute presentation was “good.” The day prior, forty-five Emory Law School students showed up; at Indiana Law, he had eighty-five. “There is a sense among students that things have pitched too far in one direction,” he says. “I’ve been very pleased at how well this organization has been received.”

As he should be. This year, the group launched a new Web site, www.betterlegalprofession.org, with a wealth of information for law school students; appointed a new president, Davida Brook; signed a book deal with Kaplan Publishing; launched a blog for LexisNexis; and joined forces with the well-established Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC) to bring its message to law firms around the country. By the end of October, BBLP had chapters at the top twenty law schools. It’s also being noticed by firms.

“The group has really grabbed the attention of many law firms recruiting at prominent law schools,” says Deborah Rhode, a law professor at Stanford and in September named director of the Stanford Center on the Legal Profession. Rhode was one of the nonprofit BBLP’s first donors. The group’s message captures what polls show, she adds. The vast majority of new lawyers, both men and women, want a better family-work balance.

Michele Landis Dauber, professor of law and (by courtesy) sociology at Stanford and BBLP’s faculty advisor, says that for students interested in work-life balance, “the

WORK COMMUNITY



BBLP members, left to right: Elizabeth Jansma, Matthew Schwiieger, Professor Michele Dauber, Davida Brook, Keisha Stanford

proportion of female equity partners is the best available proxy. This group is extremely focused on promoting racial, gender, and sexual orientation equity in large firms. Students want to see a bottom-line, demonstrable commitment to equality.”

“The group has the potential for significant leverage because they represent a portion of very desirable, highly qualified young attorneys,” says Joan Williams, a professor of law at UC Hastings College of the Law and director of the Center for Worklife Law. “They are organizing the law students with the most bargaining power from the highly elite schools.”

WHY NOW?

The issue of family-work balance has been around for a while, but Rhode credits the confluence of two forces for the formation of this group and its quick popularity. The demographics of the profession have radically changed, with women composing half of law school classes. “A vast majority of the female students want a significant involvement with family-life students,” she says, “and a growing percentage of men no longer see it as just a woman’s issue.”

In addition, increasing competition in the profession has led to escalating salary rates and higher billable hour requirements. “A couple decades ago, law firms required 1,400–1,500 hours a year. Now major firms want 2,000,” says Rhode. “What hasn’t changed is the number of hours

in the day. To meet today’s requirement requires sweatshop hours, and that’s not an appealing model for this generation.” She adds that partnership is no longer a sufficient allure for this generation. “It’s viewed as a pie-eating contest and the reward is more pie,” she says.

Williams notes that other groups have been established to address this issue, such as Yale Law Women, which promotes the interests of women in law school and the profession and posts on its Web site the top ten “family-friendly” firms. There’s also Ms. JD, founded in 2006, an online community where women lawyers and students can discuss all aspects of the profession.

“What’s important about Building a Better Legal Profession is they are organizing students across the country,” says Williams.

That BBLP was born at Stanford is no surprise to Canter. “Stanford has a culture of entrepreneurialism,” he says. “For a while, we operated like a start-up. The school also has a lot of power in the marketplace and people are highly engaged in these issues. People choose Stanford because of a perceived work-life balance.” But BBLP is growing larger than Stanford. Its national board includes, for example, Yale Law School’s Jennifer Broxmeyer, who is the chair of Yale Law Women.

The group has also done well because there are many ways students can participate, from becoming a chapter leader

at a law school to simply logging on to the Web site and making better decisions about what law firm to work for. “Either way,” says Brook, a second-year student at Stanford Law School, “you’re helping the profession. More firms will see students voting with their feet and choosing firms with good variables.”

ONE-STOP INFORMATION

Information is power. That principle lies at the heart of BBLP. With better, more accurate information, law school students can make more informed decisions about where they’d like to work, theoretically leading to a better match between firm and associate. “The second year’s job search determines his or her job after school,” says Brook. “With only six doctrinal classes under your belt, you have very little information to make your decision. BBLP is changing that.”

On its Web site, the group offers one-stop shopping for students who are interviewing with firms and attempting to differentiate between them. BBLP has taken the information from data reported to the National Association for Law Placement (NALP) by law firms from the six major geographic locations—Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, New York, San Francisco/Silicon Valley, Manhattan, Washington, DC—as well as five smaller markets: Texas, Atlanta, the Pacific Northwest, Philadelphia, and Miami. The data is then transformed into an interactive Web site and presented in a user-friendly way. The group has also taken the liberty to assign grades to the firms.

For instance, the Web site reports the percentage of male and female partners and associates in a particular market. Other ways to search are the percentage of African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and out lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transsexuals by partner or associate for a



Photo by Jim Block

BBLP members, left to right: Irene Hahn, Rob Lopez, and Keisha Stanford

particular region of the country. Another available statistic is the disparity in females compared to males who advance from associate to partner, which the group calls the “opportunity gap.”

The Web site will continue to add more information, says Brook. In the next couple of months, look for the ratio of equity to nonequity partners, with particular attention to the effect of nonequity partnership on female and minority lawyers. The organization also plans to report information on billable hours, partners’ and associates’ pro bono hours, and the percentage of partners and associates who engage in pro bono work.

The Web site lists the firms that fail to provide NALP with information and calls upon them to do so. BBLP would love to have firms report their attrition rates and actual billables—as opposed to the average, which might include part-time attorneys’ hours.

“Unless the students know what to look for, it’s hard to distinguish the firms,” says Brook. She adds that for the information to be of most value, the students need to have it before accepting an offer. “For some reason, we’re taught the time to negotiate is after you get the offer,” she says. “It’s not true. The elite law school students have more power than that.”



Photo by Jim Block

A PARTNERSHIP WITH ACC

In January 2007, Canter, Brook, and several others met with Silicon Valley and San Francisco general counsel to see if there might be some common ground. It turned out there was a great deal.

“Clients are asking for reduced attrition rates,” says Canter, who graduated from Stanford Law School last year and won an Equal Justice Works

BBLP members, left to right: Mira Serrill-Robins, Laura Heiman

Fellowship and will start work for the Mississippi Center for Justice handling Katrina relief matters. “They’ve lost associates who’ve trained on their matters.” Predicts Canter, “Clients will be the most influential agents of change on the issues of attrition and diversity.”

In September, BBLP President Brook joined with the Association of Corporate Counsel to launch the latter’s Value Challenge initiative, an effort to connect the value of legal services to its cost.

“Law firms hire a hundred law school students with the stated knowledge that only ten will be there in eight years as partners,” says Susan Hackett, ACC’s senior vice president and general counsel. “To throw away 90 percent of an expensive asset is crazy.”

The value comes, she adds, when you have lawyers that you’ve built a relationship with, that know your company, working on your matters. “In-house counsel don’t want to pay for forty learning curves, and that’s what they are made to do when you have high attrition,” she says.

In talking about reducing attrition rates, the conversation quickly turns to alternative staffing options, diversity, work-life balance—the very issues that BBLP focuses on. “They [BBLP] are pushing from the bottom up, and we are pushing from the top down,” says Hackett. Part of that push includes ACC-sponsored events and the association’s Web site (www.acc.org), which offers toolkits containing leading practices, management tools, and networks so people can discuss their experiences and ask questions.

Hackett expected huge resistance from the firms. “They are embracing this,” she says.

“Sophisticated clients are realizing that they are not getting cost-effective services from burned-out lawyers,” adds Rhode.

MORE INFORMATION COMING

BBLP’s book, *Building a Better Legal Profession’s Guide to Law Firms: The Law Student’s Guide to Finding the Perfect Law Firm Job*, which Kaplan will publish in January 2009, ranks and evaluates firms by the diversity of their associates and partners, including the proportion of partners who are female and members of various minority groups.

Students in a course on the profession Dauber taught at Stanford last year wrote the book, and Stanford 2L Irene Hahn edited it. In addition to the statistics it provides on law firms, the book also walks law school students through the interviewing process and assists them in choosing a firm. It presents questions to ask a firm during the first interview, for the call-back interview, and after students get the offer and before they accept. “We are hoping it will be a great resource,” says Brook. “With more information given to law school students, everyone wins here. People will be more suitably matched with a firm.”

Nina Schuyler is a lawyer whose first novel, The Painting, was published in 2004. She is currently working on her second novel. She can be reached at ninashuyler@hotmail.com.

