

Needed: Hispanic lawyers

Groups working to lower barriers for Latinos to study law, pass bar, says **Chris Luna**

We have all heard an attorney joke. But the lack of Hispanic attorneys in Dallas and Texas is no joke.

According to the State Bar of Texas, 5 percent of the attorneys in Dallas County are Hispanic. That compares with 39 percent of the Dallas County population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And the statewide numbers are not much better: 8 percent of the attorneys in Texas are Hispanic, as compared with 38 percent of the population.

So while Dallas and Texas populations increasingly reflect racial and ethnic diversity, the legal profession does not. There are many organizations working to address this lack of racial and ethnic diversity. They identify and support programs and initiatives that remove barriers and increase diversity in the pipeline to the legal profession, such as:

Scholarships: The American Bar Association reported that the annual average tuition and fees for an in-state resident at a public law school is \$23,879. At a private law school, that yearly amount balloons to \$41,985. Too many law students are graduating with staggering debt or, worse, they must work while in school, which can hurt their studying and grades. And in Texas, where \$20,000 is the median annual income for Hispanics, financial assistance is critical. The rising cost of tuition and fees should not be a barrier to Hispanics attending and graduating from law school.

Support in passing the bar: The cost of a bar review course in Texas averages around \$3,670. It's difficult to pass the bar exam without taking a bar prep course before the three-day bar exam. And it's also difficult to pass without studying for it full time in the months before the exam. A national study on bar passage rates revealed that more than 10 percent of Hispanic law students never pass the exam, as compared with fewer than 5 percent of their white peers. It does no good if Hispanics graduate from law school but do not pass the bar exam.

Internships: To get jobs, Hispanic law students need meaningful work experience. An internship program helps these law students get practical, hands-on legal experience. A judicial internship gives law students the opportunity to research issues, analyze case law and improve their legal writing. Plus, judicial interns are mentored by a judge and network with attorneys that may later provide professional opportunities. As a former judicial law clerk myself, I know the value and benefit of this professional and personal experience.

The Dallas Hispanic Law Foundation is addressing this pipeline shortage. Since 2006, it has awarded more than \$250,000 to over 100 law students for scholarships, bar study grants and judicial intern stipends.

The legal profession needs to continue to cultivate its diversity in Dallas and Texas. Diversity strengthens the legal system and the judiciary, and that, in turn, enhances the public's confidence and trust in the system. It also is important for the Hispanic community, Hispanic-owned businesses and international companies to have legal representatives who understand their language and culture.

Increased diversity in the legal profession also enhances the pool of candidates who will be sitting as judges on our court benches and developing public policy, as city council members, state legislators and congressional representatives often come from the legal profession.

Closing this diversity gap requires a broad and sustained effort. It's up to all of us to review and consider all the potential solutions.



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Read more about the Dallas Hispanic Law Foundation at dallashispaniclawfoundation.com.