

Diversity: The Dawning of a New Day

by Christina T. Parrish



Law student mentees, sponsored by the Diversity Conference, during the 2018 VSB Annual Meeting.

What is diversity? Merriam-Webster defines the term as “the condition of having or being composed of differing elements: VARIETY; *especially*: the inclusion of different types of people (such as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization.” For years, it seems that society has operated under this definition that limits the scope of diversity to race and culture.

Over the last few years, several leading corporations have adopted more robust definitions. For example, Hewlett-Packard defines diversity as, “the existence of many unique individuals in the workplace, marketplace and community. This includes men and women from different nations, cultures, ethnic groups, generations, backgrounds, skills, abilities and all the other unique differences that make each of us who we are.”¹

As demonstrated by Hewlett-Packard’s definition, the lens of diversity is widening

beyond a focus on race and culture. Society is realizing that an array of differences can bring about innovation and new ways of achieving shared goals. While the definition of diversity is ever-expanding, there is one element or characteristic garnering significant discussion and attention: the “first-generation” individual.

The term “first-generation” is commonly used in conjunction with a college-bound student who is the first in his or her family to pursue higher education. Numerous programs and platforms have been established to support this segment of individuals at the collegiate level, but can the same be said at the professional level?

First-generation college students often go on to become first-generation professionals. First-generation law students and lawyers are a growing force in our profession. The continued innovation of the practice requires the focused support and nurture of these individuals, because these determined men and women face a unique set of challenges.

In a recent discussion on diversity and first-generation lawyers, Sally Olson, Chief Diversity Officer at Sidley Austin, described numerous challenges that potentially impede the achievement of sustained success: “A

lack of acculturation to expectations in a professional setting; lack of knowledge of resources, inside or outside the firm, that would help professional growth and personal stability; a lack of self-confidence or sense of belonging and a higher incidence of imposter syndrome among young first generation lawyers; financial burdens that constrain first generation lawyers' career choices, along with the experience of being isolated at work and not understood in [one's] family."²² In the same discussion, Michelle Jackson, Director of Alumni Advising at Northwestern Law added, "First generation lawyers often feel like they're 'playing catch up,' like others already know the rules and got a head start on playing the game. This can be because of lack of knowledge of social norms and law firm etiquette, lack of familiarity with terminology, or lack of exposure to certain environments."²³

Unaddressed and unresolved, these challenges can result in dreams deferred and aspirations unattained. A concerted effort is required in order to bridge the experiential and educational gap, and to better develop and retain these first-generation practitioners. At the law school level, programs specifically targeted towards first-generation lawyers are in great demand. As an example, The USC Gould School of Law's First-Generation Professionals Program provides services including monthly workshops focusing on topics such as developing a growth mindset and résumé drafting, a suit fund, a bar grant, as well as resources for family members to assist in understanding the rigors of law school.⁴

Law firms are developing similar programming. In 2017, Latham & Watkins formed a First-Generation Professionals Group.⁵ The goal of this affinity group is to cultivate a sense of community among attorneys who are the first in their families to graduate from college, graduate from professional school, or enter a professional career, as well as those who have a low-income or working-class background. The group also assists first-generation professionals in their advancement at the firm through recruiting efforts, tailored professional development opportunities, mentoring, and community outreach.

Jackson suggests a collaborative approach between law schools and law firms. "Law firms should offer support and sponsorship of first generation initiatives in law schools. That way, they can become invested in enhancing

the professional development of these new professionals. This support can include identifying first generation lawyers at the firm and allowing those lawyers to serve as panelists or mentors to first generation law students. This creates a pipeline of lawyers who are equipped to handle any first-generation obstacles."⁶

Whatever the approach, it is clear that our profession should embrace first-generation lawyers. We can all contribute to the formation of the first-generation lawyer. Whether you choose to extend a hand by providing advice or mentorship, or whether your contribution is more tangible in nature, I challenge and invite you to widen your personal lens of diversity as a new day dawns in our profession.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Diversity Best Practices, *Diversity Primer* (Sept. 29, 2009) https://www.diversitybestpractices.com/sites/diversitybestpractices.com/files/import/embedded/anchors/files/diversity_primer_chapter_01.pdf
- 2 Michelle Silverthorn, *First Generation Lawyers: The Next Diversity Frontier* (Feb. 14, 2018) <https://www.2civility.org/first-generation-lawyers-diversity-frontier/>
- 3 *Id.*
- 4 Grover E. Cleveland, *Helping First-Generation Lawyers Thrive* (Apr. 13, 2018) <http://www.lawpracticetoday.org/article/helping-first-generation-lawyers/>
- 5 *Id.*
- 6 *See Supra* note 1.



Christina T. Parrish is an attorney at the Boleman Law Firm, P.C. in Richmond. Her practice primarily focuses on bankruptcy. She is the immediate-past president of the Hill-Tucker Bar Association, and currently serves as the secretary of the Old Dominion Bar Association. Christina is a resident of Hanover County, Virginia.