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A Frank & Honest Talk: AALL's Diversity Symposium Takes on Hard Questions of Creating and Maintaining Diversity in the Legal Community

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A Frank & Honest Talk

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Diversity in the



Dean Susan L. Krinsky of Tulane Law School (right) discusses the many initiatives her law school has undertaken to increase diversity while 2006-2007 AALL Diversity Committee Chair Ruth Levor looks on.

AALL's Diversity Symposium takes on hard questions of creating and maintaining diversity in the legal community

by Lauren M. Collins
photos by Kevin Berne

Dr. Leonard A. Williams, director of the Office of Career Development at the University of New Orleans, examines the biases that negatively impact the organizations in which we work, learn, and live in order to understand why facing diversity remains a difficult task in the 21st century.

Diversity Symposium: “Getting a Rise Out of Diversity: Celebrating the Challenge”

“Getting a Rise Out of Diversity: Celebrating the Challenge” took on hard questions of diversity, while keeping the spirit of New Orleans alive through celebration. With speakers who work to maintain diversity in legal practice and education every day, participants engaged in a lively discussion of what diversity actually is and how to create and sustain it.

Examining Biases

Dr. Leonard A. Williams, director of the Office of Career Development at the University of New Orleans, warned participants early on that he planned a “frank and honest talk about some really difficult subject matter.” Illustrations of why facing diversity remains a difficult task in the 21st century and why it has grown in its significance required an examination of biases that negatively impact the organizations in which we work, learn, and live. Necessarily, at times the conversation felt personal and uncomfortable.

Whether to deal with diversity is no longer the question we confront; the fact that our workplaces have become diverse by default and our perspectives have become global *demand* that we be active participants in diverse settings every day. According to Williams, a politicized idea of diversity that relies on keeping respectable numbers of protected class members in our schools and workplaces is ineffective and unacceptable. Reliance on statistics results in affirmative action, not true diversity.

Acceptance of diversity starts with a good working definition of the term, something many of our organizations lack. Williams pointed to several statements of prominent organizations and found only that of the United Nations satisfactory. A definition that is comprehensive and understandable is a must for an organization to begin progress toward real diversity.

Traditionally, institutions have focused on “managing” diversity, which results in a top-down approach that often breeds resentment. Diversity requires that it become an “organizational imperative” on all levels. Williams acknowledged the difficulty of doing this given our biases, which he divided into three categories:

(1) Assumptive Bias—We believe members of our group are better, always right, and should set the standard for everyone else.

(2) Diversity Bias—We have negative beliefs about a particular group, such as the “dumb blonde” or African-Americans as poor tippers.

(3) Guerilla Bias—We disguise insults as praise, making statements such as, “Jewish people are great with money...because they are cheap.”

Though difficult to hear, confronting the types of negative stereotypes that many embrace was one of the most important parts of the discussion. This was evidenced by later questions from the audience that demonstrated many had discovered things about their own biases that they hoped to change.

A Clear Message of Welcome

The remainder of the symposium focused on diversity in the legal community. Dean Susan L. Krinsky of Tulane Law School discussed the many initiatives her law school has undertaken to increase diversity. She listed four steps to true diversity in educational settings: (1) recruitment; (2) retention; (3) promotion and recognition of the achievements of members of diverse groups; and (4) encouragement to these students, after graduation, to remain involved in the continuing work of maintaining diversity at the school.

Though New Orleans has been a diverse community since its early history, Tulane Law has not always reflected that diversity. The first African American law school graduate, Michael A. Starks, entered Tulane under the conditions that there be no publicity of his admission. Since 1982, when Krinsky arrived at Tulane, the school has significantly increased its female students and students of color. The law school has the only law review that focuses

on issues of sexual orientation and was the first to require community service in 1987.

How did Tulane increase diversity in its law school? According to Krinsky, “it was largely a matter of being clear in [the] message of welcome.” Sadly, since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Tulane has had trouble recruiting female students, primarily due to safety concerns. Krinsky simply sees this as a new challenge that she, her staff, faculty, and students are up to.

Retention is the Key Word

K. Todd Wallace of Liskow & Lewis, a New Orleans-based law firm, spoke about law firm diversity. To better serve its diverse clientele, enrich firm creativity, and foster inclusion that leads to a more efficient practice, Liskow created Wallace’s post as minority recruiting and retention partner. Retention, Wallace pointed out, is the most significant part of his title. Law firms routinely have recruitment efforts but are not as successful at retention. Attrition numbers of associates who are members of protected classes are alarming, making recruitment an incomplete means of developing diversity.

Law firms often have great ideas about diversity on paper, but fail to put them into action. At Liskow, when financial commitments are made by the firm, personal commitments accompany them. Purchasing a table at a diversity event is not enough—Liskow’s attorneys show up. When Liskow has a diversity recruitment event, it also provides a service, like mock interviews, to support candidates. Liskow’s outreach starts early. The firm exposes

young people to law as a career as early as high school and engages in active sponsorship of a pre-law program at a local college. But the firm recognizes it has a long way to go to create a diverse workplace, and Wallace opened the floor to suggestions from the audience.

A Festive Close

To bring a festive close to the afternoon, the Diversity Committee Reception provided a sampling of New Orleans’ diverse community and history through food and song. From the Italian muffledetta to the expected, traditional fare, such as andouille sausage and crawfish dishes, the flavor of New Orleans was presented, as was its music. Elliot “Stackman” Callier and his

(continued on page 49)



quartet entertained the crowd with traditional jazz songs, like “Hello, Dolly.”

New to this year’s symposium were a half-time break that allowed participants time to discuss what they had learned thus far and the presentation of the Minority Leadership Development Award. The symposium was the perfect place to acknowledge the contributions of an up-and-coming leader in law librarianship, like Dennis Kim-Prieto, reference librarian at Rutgers University Law School Library in Newark, New Jersey. ■

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