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WORKING TOGETHER TO INCREASE DIVERSITY IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

ELIZABETH NEELY, PROJECT DIRECTOR, NEBRASKA MINORITY AND JUSTICE IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE

Diversity in the legal profession is not something that can solely be accomplished by our law schools; it requires a concerted effort among a state's legal institutions. Pre-law advisors can initiate these partnerships to everyone's benefit. This article describes some of the joint efforts taking place in Nebraska and provides information to pre-law advisors on how to begin development of joint initiatives.

Diversity in Nebraska's Legal Profession

Minorities are drastically underrepresented in Nebraska's legal profession; of the state's 4,800 attorneys only 115 identify as racial or ethnic minorities. A recent study examining the current recruitment, hiring, retention, and advancement opportunities available to racial and ethnic minorities in Nebraska, reveals a general perception among minority law students and attorneys that there are fewer opportunities in private firms for minority law school graduates and that little effort is made to recruit and retain those minority attorneys who are hired. Given these perceptions it is not surprising that few minority attorneys stay in Nebraska to practice. Interestingly, focus groups with legal employers reveal that firms are disappointed and not quite sure why they are not getting more minority applicants.

In response to these perceptions, the state's major legal institutions joined in a concerted effort to promote diversity in Nebraska's legal profession. As co-chair of Nebraska's Minority and Justice Implementation Committee, Nebraska Supreme Court Justice John Gerrard explains, "While the state is already taking significant steps towards increasing the number of minority students interested in pursuing a career in the law, we recognize that efforts to increase the pipeline of minority attorneys will only achieve limited success in diversifying Nebraska's legal community if employment opportuni-

ties are not available to minority law students upon graduation." To this end, the State's court system, bar associations and law schools have recently undertaken joint efforts to promote diversity in the profession by educating, providing resources, and bringing together law students and legal employers.

2005 Legal Diversity Summit

On April 11, 2005, over 175 participants including Nebraska's legal employers and law students of color from Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and South Dakota gathered together for Nebraska's first Legal Diversity Summit. The Summit was successful in providing law students from the region with new knowledge, new contacts and an interest in seeking employment in Nebraska after law school and provided Nebraska's legal profession with some new ways of understanding the value of a diverse workforce, strategies for recruiting and retaining attorneys of color, and a renewed commitment to work toward a more racially diverse legal community in Nebraska.

Legal Diversity Website

In an ongoing effort to promote diversity in the legal profession, the Minority and Justice Implementation Committee, together with the Nebraska State Bar Association, the Midlands Bar Association, the Nebraska Hispanic Bar Association, Creighton University School of Law and the University of Nebraska College of Law developed a website designed to showcase Nebraska's growing diversity and provide a unique view of what the state has to offer arriving legal professionals and law students. The new website (www.ne.legaldiversity.org) also provides a venue for discussion forums, on-line mentoring, personal commentaries from Nebraska's law students and attorneys of color, resources to help legal employers promote diversity, information about net-

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- E. Neely

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working opportunities, minority bar associations, and job postings from firms and organizations actively seeking minority applicants. Nebraska's legal community hopes that this website will provide prospective and current law students and attorneys of color with the information and resources they need to help them build relationships in Nebraska, while providing our law schools and legal employers with the resources to reach out to minority candidates.

The Benefits of a Joint Approach

As pre-law advisors develop programs intended to increase minority recruitment, admissions and graduation from law school, I encourage you to utilize partnerships not only with law schools but also with your local court system and bar associations. Utilizing these partnerships is beneficial for all parties. First, it sends a message to prospective law students that the legal community values and is supportive of diversity and gives students an opportunity to practice networking and navi-

gating in the profession's culture. It can provide prospective and current students with contacts, role models and mentors. Involving the court system, bar associations, and firms in your diversity initiatives can also strengthen these entities' understanding and institutional commitment towards a more diverse profession.

Where to Begin

Promoting diversity in the legal profession can take many forms, from formal career fairs, mentoring programs, summer pre-law programs, and diversity summits to simply inviting law students to attend Bar Association events. The American Bar Association's Commission on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Profession provides numerous resources on pipeline issues and the various diversity initiatives that have been undertaken by law schools, firms, bar associations and court systems across the nation. Also many state bar associations already have diversity committees in place, contact your state and local minority bar associations to develop new opportunities for your pre-law and current law students.

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