

THE COLORADO PLEDGE TO DIVERSITY

BY JENNIFER JASKOLKA & CICI CHENG



Promoting diversity and inclusion in our legal profession is not a new concept. Efforts to increase diversity in law firm and legal department ranks have varied and include emphasizing recruiting and hiring, implementing internal affinity and resource groups, and formalizing mentoring programs, all with little progress. Newer initiatives such as Diversity Labs' Mansfield Rule, named after Arabella Mansfield, the first woman admitted to the practice of law in the U.S., measures whether law firms have affirmatively considered women, LGBTQ+, and minority lawyers for promotions, senior level hiring, and significant leadership roles in the firm, and is intended to diversify law firms at the highest levels. Other initiatives, such as the Colorado Pledge to Diversity, focus organically and upward at building a pipeline of entry-level diverse candidates to address the perennial complaint from employers that only a limited pool of diverse candidates exist. The Colorado Pledge bridges participating employers with diverse students right out of the gate during the students' 1L/rising 2L summer.

The Colorado Pledge to Diversity began as a "pledge" between 23 leading Denver law firms declaring their commitment to diversity. While the

Pledge was originally signed in 1993, it wasn't until 2000 that the Pledge developed its linchpin 1L Summer Clerkship Program. Since then, that 1L Pledge Program has directly fueled the pipeline of diverse attorney by matching into paid clerkships hundreds of 1L students from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

The catalyst for the Pledge came from pressure that Colorado companies were applying on firms to hire more diverse attorneys, and from the Pledge's desire to tackle that pressure by initiating early and direct access to employment for diverse students. At the time, unpaid internships for law students had become more and more commonplace. And students, financially able to accept those unpaid internships in their 1L summer, became more competitive during the on-campus interview process with firms during fall of their 2L year; the increase of unpaid internships had a disproportionately negative affect on diverse students.

The 1L Pledge Program was created to allow 1L students to undergo a rigorous application and interview process for the opportunity of a paid clerkship with a firm or in-house department in the private sector. The program is enticement to keep in Colorado diverse students from University of Denver Sturm Law, University of Colorado Law, and University Wyoming Law (newly added in 2018).

The 1L Pledge Program's primary purpose is educational, seeking to:

- Expose diverse students to the work, requirements, and culture of law firms and corporate legal departments;
- Help students develop professional skills, confidence, insight, and resume credentials, and make professional contacts; and
- Introduce legal employers to talented diverse students early on and provide access for recruitment and training of those students.

The application process is straight-forward but stringent. Diverse students with a minimum 2.85 GPA may apply after their 1L fall semester. After reviewing the applications (which includes the unique aspects of a personal statement and a confidential evaluation from a legal writing instructor), the employers hold panel interviews to help the student develop an interviewing skillset; for many students, this is their first professional interview. Following the panel interviews is a “kick-off” reception where students interact with employers, the Pledge Executive Committee, and judges and other legal community leaders. This is again many students’ first critical networking opportunity. Employers then assess the students and proceed through a “draft” process (much like a fantasy sport draft) to select students for callback interviews. Once interviews are complete, employers and students both rank each other and are “matched” for the summer (much like a medical school residency match).

The 1L Pledge Program has made significant strides in the last two years, substantially increasing employer participation from 27 firms and legal departments (29 clerkship positions) in 2016, to now an astounding 44 employers (46 clerkship positions) in 2018. A parallel rise in student applications happened: from 63 students in 2016 to 81 in 2018. Several new employers have already committed to participate in the 2019 summer program.

With this momentum, the Pledge also began collaborations with other local organizations, including Law School Si Se Puede and the Center for Legal Inclusiveness, funding scholarships to promote similar goals for the advancement of diversity.

The Pledge’s recent achievements has everything to do with the diverse Executive Committee working behind the scenes: CiCi Cheng (Wheeler Trigg O’Donnell), Jennifer Jaskolka (Xcel Energy), Matt Douglas (Arnold & Porter), Ana Gutierrez (Hogan Lovells), Ben Ross (Jackson Kelly), Sara Sharp

(Sparkman+Foote), Rachel Jennings (White and Steele), Jennifer Allen (Davis Graham & Stubbs), Lily Ramirez (McElroy Deutsch), Laura Lopez (Jones & Keller), Andrew Bennett (Energy Outreach Colorado), and Liz Titus (Hogan Lovells). Six Executive Committee members are themselves 1L Pledge Alumni.

The benefits of the Pledge have paid off and demonstrate what effective collaboration between law schools and legal employers can achieve. The number of diverse students attending the schools has increased. For example, Colorado Law has seen a significant increase in its incoming diverse student population rising from 17 percent in 2015 to 29.4 percent in 2017 with many citing the Pledge program as a draw to the law school. Importantly, a vast majority of Pledge alumni remain in Colorado and “pay it forward” by advocating for the Pledge to their employers. Four Pledge Executive Committee members, CiCi Cheng, Ana Gutierrez, Rachel Jennings, and Lily Ramirez accepted full-time offers of employment from their Pledge employers. Other Pledge graduates such as Judge Don Jesse Toussaint (2007) has used the skillset, experience, and connections received during the Pledge to accomplish his dream of becoming a member of the Colorado judiciary. While diversity remains a difficult hurdle for our field, the Pledge has demonstrated actual advancement by providing unique and early access for diverse students in its efforts to build the pipeline. **D**



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Please join the Colorado Pledge to Diversity, Moye White, and the Center for Legal Inclusiveness in welcoming diverse incoming 1L law students more information can be found at the CLI website: www.centerforlegalinclusiveness.org.