

The Law School Consortium Project: Law Schools Supporting Graduates to Increase Access to Justice for Low and Moderate-Income Individuals and Communities

*by Deborah Howard**

I. Introduction

The Law School Consortium Project began as an experiment designed by a group of law schools.¹ The goal was to extend the educational and professionalism missions of law schools beyond graduation to provide training, mentoring, and other support to solo and small-firm lawyers. By helping this segment of the legal profession develop economically viable and professionally satisfying practices, the Project seeks to increase the availability of quality legal services for low and moderate-income individuals and communities.

The Project's founding members wished to address the following: (1) access to quality "low bono"² legal services; (2) the dearth of guidance and services for solo and small-firm lawyers to help them provide quality legal services and handle ethical and practice dilemmas; and (3) the large number of law school graduates who enter law schools aspiring to work for the public interest, but, upon graduation, find themselves debt-ridden or unable to obtain one of the scarce public service positions available.

The Project has demonstrated that by supporting solo and small-firm practitioners, law schools can enable them to have satisfying, economically viable careers while serving the needs of low and moderate-income individuals and communities. In supporting these practitioners, law schools are able to expand the field of public interest practice by providing students with employment options that enable them to develop

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¹ Funded by the Open Society Institute's Program on Law & Society, the project was formed in 1997 by City University of New York School of Law, University of Maryland Law School, Northeastern University School of Law, and St. Mary's University School of Law after many months of collaboration. St. Mary's University School of Law withdrew as a member of the Law School Consortium Project in July of 2000.

² "Low bono" legal services accommodate people who cannot afford to retain a lawyer but who do not qualify for legal services." Memorandum from Anne Endress Skove, to the Knowledge Management Office of the National Center for State Courts (July 1, 1997) (copy on file with Fordham Urban Law Journal); see also Joseph Wharton, *Legal Help For The Working Poor*, A.B.A. J., Dec. 1994, at 108 (discussing low bono services as a way for attorneys to help people who do not qualify for pro bono services).

public interest practices and allowing students to engage in work about which they care deeply.

The Project is premised on the belief that helping solo and small-firm practitioners provide high quality legal services is vital because of the crucial role they play in the legal community. In light of the limited funding for, and restrictions on, legal services organizations³ and the decline in pro bono participation by large law firm attorneys,⁴ solo and small-firm practitioners are essential sources of legal services to low and moderate-income individuals and communities. ABA studies have documented that seventy-five percent of low-income persons who utilize lawyers receive assistance from private attorneys rather than from legal services organizations.⁵ The studies report that eighty percent of the legal needs of low-income persons remain unmet.⁶ The founding member schools thought building networks among typically isolated solo and small-firm practitioners would connect them with each other, as well as resources and services,⁷ and thereby augment the success of their practices and enable them to provide quality legal services.

The member schools concluded that law schools should create these practitioner networks because they are, by virtue of their expertise and resources, well suited to

1. build networks of solo and small-firm practitioners who can learn from and support each other;
2. contribute ongoing training and education needed by recent graduates to provide quality legal services;
3. provide practitioners with instruction in substantive law;
4. modify curricula based on their experiences with solo and small-firm practitioners to better prepare the large number of law graduates who ultimately enter solo and small-firm practices; and
5. educate students and graduates on innovative legal services.

The results of this experiment demonstrate that law school-supported networks of solo and small-firm practitioners are both valuable and viable. The creation of these networks has had a significant positive impact on solo and small-firm practitioners⁸ and increased access to legal services for low and moderate-income individuals and communities.⁹ In turn, these networks benefit the participating law schools as well.¹⁰

³ Jeanne Charn, A Comment on the Current State of Government and Charitably Funded legal Services for the Poor in the U.S., draft paper presented at June 2001 Melbourne International Legal Aid Conference, available at <http://www.dmt.canberra.edu.au/ilog/cpnference/papers/charn.pdf>.

⁴ Greg Winter, *Legal Firms Cutting Back on Free Services for Poor*, N.Y. Times, Aug. 17, 2000, at A1.

⁵ Consortium on Legal Servs. and the Pub., ABA, *Agenda for Access: The American People and Civil Justice* (1996); Consortium on Legal Servs. and the Pub., ABA, *Report on the Legal Needs of the Low-Income Public* (1994).

⁶ *Agenda for Access*, supra note 5; *Legal Needs*, supra note 5.

⁷ These resources and services include peer mentoring and technical assistance; access to law libraries; training in law office management, technology, and substantive law areas; community education opportunities; case referrals; discounts on services that practitioners want or need, such as malpractice insurance, legal software, legal research databases, etc.; and a forum to share experiences, successes, challenges, and practice tips.

⁸ *Infra* Part III.A.

⁹ See *infra* Part III.B.

¹⁰ *Infra* Part III.C.

As we face the ever-increasing gap between those who can and those who cannot afford legal services, we must find ways to expand the legal services delivery system beyond increasing the number of attorneys who provide pro bono services. Creating and supporting practitioner networks and participating in the Law School Consortium Project is a way for law schools to support an important alumni constituency, improve the professionalism and quality of legal services provided by solo and small-firm practitioners, and provide access to justice for low and moderate-income individuals.

II. Description of the Practitioner Network Models

Each participating law school experimented with a different model to help create a “best practices” menu that could be replicated at other law schools.

A. “Practice Group” Model—City University of New York (CUNY) School of Law

In keeping with CUNY Law School’s articulated mission, “Law in the Service of Human Needs,”¹¹ the CUNY model was designed to increase access to justice, re-envision the lawyer’s role in society, and revitalize the fundamental values of the legal profession. The CUNY model has four practice groups¹² each with a particular focus.¹³ The model’s services and resources include networking and peer technical assistance; reduced rates for online legal research services; legal research; access to a listserv; professional skills development seminars; a mentoring program; technology training; and a summer intern program.

B. Demonstration Law Office Model -- University of Maryland School of Law

Prior to the conception of the Law School Consortium Project, The Maryland University School of Law made efforts to initiate its own project. Five solo practitioners regularly met with two former Law School Clinic directors to explore how a network of affiliated solo practitioners might come together to “do good and do well.”¹⁴

The project became a reality when Civil Justice, Inc. was created and a project director hired.¹⁵ Unlike the CUNY and Northeastern models, the Maryland model was developed as a demonstration law office in conjunction with a network of practitioners and is housed outside of the Law School. The inclusion of network members affiliated with local community organizations, as well as private practitioners, helps bring neighborhood issues forward and serves as a source of client referrals to network members.

¹¹ See CUNY Sch. of Law, Philosophy and Approach to Legal Education, <http://www.law.cuny.edu/Apply/philmis/index.html> (last visited Jan. 29, 2002).

¹² The CUNY Model also organized the Employment Discrimination Practice Group. This group, which had seven participants and lasted approximately one semester, functioned as a graduate seminar for alumni who work in the employment law field.

¹³ The Family Law Practice Group seeks to meet the large unmet legal need in the area of domestic relations. The Immigration Law Practice Group consists of attorneys practicing immigration law. The General Practice Group includes attorneys who practice in a variety of areas. The General Practice II Group focuses on recent graduates and experienced practitioners from large law firms or public interest organizations who are interested in opening their own private practices.

¹⁴ Press Release, Civil Justice, Inc. Launches People’s Lawyers Network, (on file with author). See generally Alan Dershowitz, Letters To A Young Lawyer (2001) (discussing the opportunities that young lawyers have to do good and do well at the same time).

¹⁵ Denis J. Murphy, Civil Justice, Inc.: New Methods for Delivery of Legal Services to the Underserved, Civil Justice Network, [at http://www.civiljusticenetwork.org/methods.asp](http://www.civiljusticenetwork.org/methods.asp).

Early on, a mission statement was adopted that called for a commitment to increasing access to justice to low and moderate-income individuals, and members are expected to commit to this mission statement.

Membership fees are used to support the attorney network.¹⁶ The project director and members have considered other financial options such as acting as a lawyer referral service, charging a fee for services and taking a percentage of fees earned on cases referred to network members. The group has also contemplated becoming a bundler and reseller of services at discounted rates. By purchasing services in bulk on behalf of its members and reselling them with the addition of a small fee, the project could bring in additional income while providing network members with discounted services.

The Maryland model provides mentoring; networking and peer technical assistance; practice management assistance; substantive law training; access to a listserv; legal products and services at a reduced rate;¹⁷ a client referral service; marketing services and opportunities;¹⁸ and mediation training.¹⁹

C. Interdisciplinary Model---The Northeastern University School of Law

The Northeastern Economic Development model and Domestic Violence model, were structured to help solo and small-firm lawyers sustain economically viable practices that prevent family violence and promote economic development by working with non-legal organizations. Northeastern Law School was well situated to do so in light its two existing interdisciplinary institutes—the Domestic Violence Institute and the Urban Law & Public Policy Institute.

1. Domestic Violence Model

The Domestic Violence Model was designed as a collaboration between the Northeastern Domestic Violence Institute and the Women's Bar Association to create a resource and support network for family law attorneys doing domestic violence work.²⁰ The primary goal of this project was education—training practitioners to handle domestic violence cases and lessening the burden on overburdened domestic violence practitioners currently handling those cases. To assist the project, the Domestic Violence Institute and the Women's Bar Association created an Advisory Board comprised of members of both organizations as well as domestic violence specialists from legal services organizations and solo and small-firm practices.

The Domestic Violence model was organized differently than the other models in that it directly involved students as well as practitioners. Rather than being an ongoing network of attorneys, it was designed as an actual law school seminar, offered for academic credit and taught by the project director and three senior domestic violence practitioners. Also included were six junior practitioners who, although experienced with family law, had little or no experience with domestic violence cases. These attorneys

¹⁶ Membership is free for lawyers in their first year of private practice, \$100 for lawyers in their second and third years, and \$300 for lawyers with more than three years experience.

¹⁷ The model provides members with discounts for such services as online legal research, continuing legal education programs, time-keeping software, and malpractice insurance.

¹⁸ Members can include marketing information on the project's web site, as well as links to their personal web sites.

¹⁹ Members were given free access to the Law School's summer mediation course that led to mediator certification in the State of Maryland.

²⁰ Domestic Violence Grant Awarded to Northeastern School of Law and Two Legal Services Agencies, Forefront, Fall 1999, <http://www.alumni.neu.edu/forefront/9909/domestic.html>.

were offered the seminar free in return for their willingness to take on a pro bono domestic violence case through the Women's Bar Association Domestic Violence Family Law Pro Bono Panel. The senior practitioner faculty members served as mentors to the junior practitioners, as well as clinical placement supervisors to the participating students.

The course was designed to provide participants with an opportunity to network with practitioners, share practice tips, and develop strategies for handling challenging issues, with the goal that participants would learn how to engage in collaborative lawyering. To that end, seminar participants were required to commit to: (1) take one Women's Bar Association Family Law Pro Bono Panel case; (2) regularly attend the seminar; (3) build a private practice that would serve domestic violence victims for affordable fees; and (4) maintain an email account and use offered technological resources.

The Northeastern Domestic Violence model successfully met its objectives. An intensive and valuable seminar, as well as a high quality domestic violence curriculum, helped practitioners understand domestic violence cases and made them aware of local legal and non-legal community resources. Although project staff found it challenging to reach three different audiences—senior practitioners, junior practitioners, and students—they were able to provide valuable service to each. In addition to educating the junior practitioners and law students, the seminar benefited the senior practitioners who served as faculty-mentors as well. The project has effectively led to a stronger sense of community among domestic violence practitioners involved.

Practitioners who participated in the seminar received substantive law training; mentoring; intern assistance; web-based resources and communication; a mental health seminar;²¹ resource materials;²² technology assistance and training; and business management training.

2. Economic Development Model

The Economic Development model created a network of solo and small-firm practitioners working in economic development and linking small businesses and nonprofit organizations to network lawyers to strengthen communities. Many small businesses only contact a lawyer at a moment of crisis, not earlier when legal advice might be more useful. By helping small businesses obtain timely legal assistance, members strive to help them grow and thereby create jobs in their communities. The network empowers members to take action that, absent the network's support and resources, they would not otherwise be able to take.²³

²¹ The project offered participants the opportunity to participate in a mental health seminar. The seminar was designed to help students and practitioners learn about mental health issues experienced by survivors and children of domestic violence, as well as the impact of the psychological stresses and pressures involved in domestic violence practice. Project staff wanted to make the students and junior practitioners aware of the pressures associated with this type of work while providing the senior practitioners support they need to continue working in this area. The seminar confirmed that there is a potential for burnout for practitioners working in the domestic violence area and that providing a sense of community and a vehicle for self-care through networking is valuable.

²² All practitioners were provided with written coursework materials and a community resource book. The book was designed to help them expand their knowledge about services available and encourage them to enlist non-legal resources to support their domestic violence practice.

²³ All quotations and member reactions expressed in this article were taken from the author's notes from personal interviews, surveys, and focus groups conducted from 2000 to 2001. The notes are on file with the author at The Law School Consortium Project.

The Economic Development model defined its target client community geographically (the Boston area and one or two adjacent communities), ethnically, and by income, targeting traditionally underserved communities. The model particularly recruited female attorneys and attorneys of color because these practitioners frequently practice within the targeted client communities.

Before commencing, project staff conducted focus groups with practitioners to determine the areas in which support was most needed. Based on this research, the following services were provided: networking and peer technical assistance; continuing legal education seminars and materials; marketing and law practice management workshops; technology assistance and training; access to small business database;²⁴ assistance in developing business relationships and connections;²⁵ access to a secure-access interactive web site; information about nonprofit and small business legal audits;²⁶ library access; and assistance with client development.²⁷

III. Benefits of Developing Law School-Supported Practitioner Networks

A. Benefits to Solo and Small-Firm Practitioners

The Law School Consortium Project demonstrates that developing law school-supported practitioner networks results in significant benefits to solo and small-firm practitioners, thereby increasing access to legal services for low and moderate-income individuals and communities.

1. *Decreasing Isolation, Increasing Confidence, and Providing a Community Of Like-Minded Peers*

Participation in the networks removes the sense of isolation many practitioners experience, enabling them to locate colleagues who share similar issues and problems. One member described the benefits of being “connected” as follows:

As a solo, I felt isolated and had no group or individual to turn to for help with procedural matters, legal issues, approaches to individual cases, research . . . I am now part of a ‘firm’ . . . [and] have access to research and people to go to for help on a myriad of issues. I have a much more positive feeling about my ability to ‘lawyer’ and a feeling of self worth . . . I do not believe that I would still be in practice without the [network].

²⁴ Network members are provided with access to a database of small businesses in the nearby Boston Empowerment Zone to assist in their marketing activities.

²⁵ In addition to developing the network of attorneys, the project director has worked to ensure that the practitioners take advantage of the connections the Urban Law & Public Policy Institute has with small businesses and nonprofit and community organizations that focus on economic development. Network members are provided assistance in developing relationships and connections with community organizations, community developers, and others. Through their own connections with the community, project staff attempt to include network at community meetings with local developers and organizations that do small business development work.

²⁶ Students in the Urban Law & Public Policy Institute created valuable resources to provide network members with information about conducting legal audits for nonprofit corporations and small businesses.

²⁷ The Economic Development model makes efforts to help network members develop clients. These include seeking to enlist network members listed on a register of available lawyers to provide real estate closing assistance to community members who purchase housing units at a local housing project on the outskirts of the University’s campus. The Economic Development network also has a relationship with the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship so that network members can provide legal services to students who developing their own businesses.

Another member explained that as a member of the network, “you are not out there floating on your own, you’ve got help.”

Each of the models provides network members with access to email by which members can communicate, post information, ask and answer questions, and request and provide advice. Project staff members also use email to send members information about law school, bar association and other events, as well as legal news updates.

Some members described network membership as providing a “psychological safety net” and “security blanket,” and one member described the network as “reviv[ing the member’s] my confidence in being a private practitioner.”

[The network] gives me security as a solo practitioner to know that I am not out here alone and that I have a source to go to if I am uncertain about an issue so that my clients can and will receive quality legal representation. All I want to do as a solo practitioner is to provide quality legal representation to clients in areas that impact their lives. It is not easy out here.

Participants described the sense that they are members of a “virtual law firm” stating that “when you hire one member, you get the power, support, and backing of other members.” According to members, “[the network] provides large firm support for solo practitioners” and allows them to “be part of a legal dream team while being a solo practitioner.” By developing and supporting networks of like-minded practitioners, the founding schools have provided solo and small-firm attorneys with a chance to support to each other in the common mission of “doing good and doing well” and meeting their “double bottom line.”²⁸

Members describe the network as providing a community of equals with a shared commitment and vision, and spoke about the uniqueness of sharing a commitment to providing low cost and free legal assistance. Network members do not view money as the most important focus for their practice, they “figure pro bono work into the calculation,” and describe themselves as “people who are more interested in doing what is right than in making money.” One member who successfully represented a church that the local government was trying to close down, asked the church members to “pray to decide what to pay me.” Another member described her practice as a “Robin Hood practice” that allows her to represent clients unable to pay fees (or only small fees), because she represents other clients who do pay fees. She is able to make this work, she says, because of the time saving devices and support the network provides.

Members emphasized mutual trust as a critical element distinguishing the network from bar associations. Practitioners describe the network as “a supportive group as well as a professional association” and as a new model of noncompetitive, supportive law practice. When comparing network participation with bar association involvement, “you are comparing apples and oranges . . . [Bar] associations are political networking

²⁸ In a meeting at the University of Maryland in June 2001, Consortium Project Advisory Board member James Head coined the term “double bottom line”. This term describes the dual goals of network members seeking to meet (1) their business bottom line of remaining economically viable and (2) their social bottom line of contributing to their communities. See Seth Oltman, *The Double Bottom Line*, L. Mag., January 2001.

organizations, while the network is a practicing . . . work group.” The network, one member indicated, provides a non-adversarial environment that offers “a home base for solo practitioners who are out there alone.”

Network members are provided with a formal structure that enables the development of connections with other practitioners. According to one project director, the network

teach[es] the members that it is permissible to reach out to others to strategize or get advice on how to handle a particular problem. Creating an environment similar to that of a law firm has enabled [network] members to grow as practitioners and share as colleagues in a common struggle. The collegiality experienced in practice groups is the backbone of [the network’s] successes.

In the collegial, non-competitive atmosphere of the network, members readily mentor and coach each other. They are willing to “walk each other through” new processes and provide assistance when necessary. This allows practitioners to learn about areas with which they lack familiarity.

Mentoring relationships hinge on trust. Practitioners are often reluctant to take advantage of formal mentoring services provided by bar associations and other legal organizations for fear of imposing on others or appearing ignorant or incompetent. While participants noted that they feel intimidated and uncomfortable asking questions of bar association mentors, they found that asking advice of fellow network members is “more like speaking to a friend.” One participant noted that with bar association mentor programs, she is hesitant to question senior practitioners. “You can’t let your hair down because you are in a professional community.” On the other hand, network members feel “safe to reveal [their] ignorance” to each other because they are in a collaborative, not competitive, relationship.

Access to a network of other practitioners permits members to transition into new practice areas because members have access to mentoring from other experienced members. This enables practitioners to shift practice areas when necessary to meet changes in client needs or the economy. Network members also have the benefit of mentoring and advice from project directors with extensive private practice experience and faculty who have expertise in specific areas.

Members share their experiences with each other regarding legal research, practical tips, strategy, and management practices. Questions are answered quickly, and members receive specific practical information in a timely fashion.²⁹ Through the network, members share advice about cases and resources, and their experiences with various vendors and technology, such as printers and bookkeeping software. The CUNY Model recently initiated a network mentoring program for its members designed to ensure that new lawyers starting their own practices have access to experienced attorneys who can help them avoid many practical and ethical pitfalls.³⁰

²⁹ Questions posted via listserv usually receive same-day answers.

³⁰ During the summer of 2000, this formal mentoring program was established and made available to members of the General Practice II Group, the newest members of the legal profession. The mentoring program is two-tiered involving (1) principal mentors and (2) practice specialty mentors. The principal mentors are CUNY graduates who have been in practice five or more years. They are assigned a mentee on

2. *Providing Members with Information on Substantive Law*

The projects have sought to offer members access to structured presentations on substantive practice areas.³¹ The CUNY, Maryland, and Northeastern Economic Development models, for example, provide members with regular presentations by faculty, fellow network members, or other practitioners. The Northeastern Domestic Violence model concentrates on providing members with information about domestic violence law and practice. Faculty in CUNY's network developed substantive law courses that enable network members to receive continuing legal education. Maryland and the Northeastern Economic Development models offer members access to free or discounted continuing legal education courses presented by bar associations. Additionally, because one of the most significant challenges for solo and small-firm practitioners is finding time to research legal issues, CUNY's network includes a project librarian who helps members with their legal research.³²

3. *Teaching Law Office Management*

Many network participants identified marketing and client development as their main business concerns. The projects teach network members how to manage their practices as small businesses. It helps them pay attention to the bottom line, develop more efficient management practices, and effectively market their practices. In addition to presentations on substantive practice areas, each model offers seminars in areas such as marketing and client development, business planning, and billing and accounting.³³ Since solo and small-firm practitioners often cannot pay student interns, CUNY funds a Summer Internship Program through which some network members obtain the services of CUNY law students during the summer.³⁴

One member discussed the benefits of learning about law office management and practice issues:

[A]s a solo practitioner, pressured for time, the business component of my practice became neglected. I kept poor track of time, sent bills sporadically—based on time I thought I spent on each client—and did not always charge clients for expenditures such as copying, long distance calls, Fed-Exes, etc. I was losing money and not fully collecting what I did bill for . . . I now keep much better track of my time, bill on a timely basis, and bill for all disbursements . . . I could not have sustained my practice without the help and encouragement I have received.

Another member said, “[Participation] in the network has resulted in this firm receiving referrals as well as hardware and software that have now become indispensable to our

a one-to-one basis and work with them on day-to-day practical questions. The practice specialty mentors, on the other hand, have several years experience in a particular area of law and are available to answer specific questions posed by the participating network members on an as-needed basis.

³¹ At least one project director found that, as a result of attending meetings that address specific practice areas and having a network of supportive peers, network members often are willing to expand to new practice areas.

³² Staff members are considering charging a fee for the use of this service.

³³ CUNY project staff introduced members to the Harris Group, an organization that provides business consulting and billing services to some of the members. This service proved immensely valuable in helping practitioners learn law office management skills.

³⁴ CUNY, Report to the Open Society Institute, (2001) (on file with the author).

day-to-day operations.” A different member pointed out, “I have been able to provide better service because of the information and support of [the network]. I am also able to manage better financially.”

4. *Providing Members With Business Referrals*

Network members receive referrals from their law school affiliates, from each other, and from legal services organizations that refer clients who are not eligible for their services. Members refer cases to each other in the same way that attorneys in large firms refer cases to their colleagues in other departments. At Northeastern, members of the Economic Development network became interested in joining together in a community education project as a means to attract new clients.³⁵ At Maryland, cases that come into the demonstration law office are referred out to network members.³⁶ In addition, members developed a list including the name, contact information, and practice area of all members to encourage intra-network referrals.³⁷

5. *Encouraging Members to Work for Low and Moderate-Income Communities*

Network members spoke about law students entering law school with a desire to do public interest work but emerging jaded and feeling pressured to work in a large law firm. The network, they feel, counters the competitive and alienating law school culture and revives and nurtures the desire and energy to “do good.” Participation in the network actually helps members reinforce their original desire to practice law and work for the public interest and social justice.

6. *Potentially Providing Benefits for Practitioners of Color*

In light of the scarcity of partners of color in large law firms nationwide, helping attorneys of color succeed in developing and maintaining their own law firms is a vital undertaking.³⁸ The University of Maryland Law School network indicates that the creation of practitioner networks may be an important vehicle for providing practitioners of color with a welcoming and collegial community. Attorneys of color make up almost one-third of Maryland’s network. In such a community, attorneys of color may find the mentoring and support not found as easily in bar associations and other traditional organizations.

B. *Benefits to Low and Moderate-Income Individuals and Communities*

The creation of practitioner networks by law schools results in many benefits to low and moderate-income individuals and communities.

1. *Provide Various Kinds Of Support to Members that Enables them to Provide Pro Bono and Affordable Legal Services*

Network participants clearly stated that their involvement enables them to provide pro bono and affordable legal services. The current networks serve as referral sources for individuals with little or no money and educates those individuals and their communities about legal issues. Network members aid individuals who would otherwise fall between the cracks of the justice system.

³⁵ Infra Part III.B2 .

³⁶ The most frequent referral area is bankruptcy and the most frequent sources of referrals are the Legal Aid Bureau, Law School faculty members, and community organizations.

³⁷ Civil Justice Network Attorneys, Civil Justice Network, at <http://www.civiljusticenetwork.org/participants.asp>.

³⁸ Alan Jenkins, *Losing the Race*, Am. Law., Oct. 2001, at 90; Alan Jenkins, *Promoting Diversity*, Am. Law., Oct. 2001, at 91.

Most of my clients earn just enough money to exclude them from receiving assigned counsel in the family court . . . It would be impossible for [these clients] to hire an attorney who charged customary rates. Most of my clients are also members of minority groups and all of them are battered women. I charge my clients on a sliding fee according to their incomes. This would not be possible without the help of [the network]. I do not earn enough money to carry out a solo practice that represents such a large number of low-income clients without the resources that [the network] provides . . . The large number of low-income and minority battered women that I have represented have all benefited from my membership in [the network]. I now have a list of other members to whom I can refer clients that I do not have the time to represent or who have legal issues that I do not deal with, allowing more women access to legal representation . . .

Without [the network], I could not continue my dream of representing low-income battered women and also take pro bono cases from agencies who represent indigent battered women.³⁹

Due to their collaboration, network members can take on cases in areas with which they are not familiar and help people who otherwise cannot afford a lawyer. One member stated, “Through help with research [from the CUNY network’s staff librarian] and the ability to discuss cases, through email and directly with other members, I can do things more quickly and thoroughly, thereby saving my clients money and representing them more aggressively.”⁴⁰ Another member discovered that “Many more clients are getting expert representation through [the network. It] has had a very positive impact on the persons in the community that I serve.”

Network membership enables members to render higher quality services because of access to a comprehensive knowledge base.

Saving time allows me to take on more clients for smaller fees. [The network] helps me save time with legal issues and practical issues. Running a business is time consuming. By providing me with software, a billing service, lectures on how to efficiently run an office, and contact with others who also provide practice advice, I can spend more time being an effective advocate and less on office details.⁴¹

2. Provide Low and Moderate-Income Individuals and Communities with Access to Legal Information and Services

The CUNY General Practice Group developed a Community Empowerment Lecture Series by which group members provide free information about basic legal rights and strategies to community organizations, churches, and CUNY students in the five

³⁹ E-mail from a Project Director Describing Feedback from a Network Member (Nov. 16, 2000) (on file with author).

⁴⁰ Id.

⁴¹ Id.

boroughs.⁴² The CUNY Model developed another program in conjunction with Baruch College and Queens College where members of the Immigration and General Practice Groups provide legal advice to students at these colleges on a weekly basis for two to three hours a night.⁴³ Members earn fifty dollars per hour (fees are provided by student government funds at each site), and students receive free legal assistance.⁴⁴ This not only provides members with an additional source of income, but also provides a much-needed service for these college students. Because New York City colleges have so many students who are immigrants and/or of modest means,⁴⁵ this weekly program serves a vital function.

CUNY is currently working to obtain funding to develop a Family Advocacy Program in partnership with the Community Pediatrics Program at Children's Hospital of New York. This program will be a medical legal partnership designed to improve the health and welfare of low-income families through legal assistance provided at community health care sites. Network practitioners will provide education and training to health care providers, direct legal assistance to children and their families, and multidisciplinary policy advocacy on behalf of children and their families.

The Northeastern Economic Development network has been working on a community outreach program to serve local small businesses. A major Boston law firm has aided in the preparation of materials for this course and agreed to serve as back-up counsel in this endeavor. A number of Northeastern Economic Development network members have become involved in an initiative that assists organizations in developing affordable housing in target communities. Similarly, at Maryland, network members participate in the First Time Home Buyers Project. This Project offers free legal advice to first time-home buyers in Baltimore to help them avoid becoming victims of predatory lending and mortgage fraud schemes.⁴⁶

The University of Maryland Law School's Housing, Economic, and Community Development Clinic, which represents community organizations, not individuals, refers individuals with legal needs to network members, thus helping both the clients and the practitioners. The litigation conducted by the Clinic may result in the development of issues that need to be handled on behalf of individuals impacted by the litigation. Without the network members, the Clinic is faced with individuals in need of legal assistance whom it otherwise would be unable to help.⁴⁷

The Clinic also has cases that it cannot take for other reasons, such as conflicts. Clinic faculty members are able to refer these cases to the network. Because faculty

⁴² CUNY, *supra* note 4.

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ Office of Institutional Research and Analysis at <http://www.cuny.edu/topframe-abtcuny.html> (providing CUNY student data as of Fall 2000).

⁴⁶ For more information see The First Time Home Buyers Project, Civil Justice Network, at http://www.civiljusticenetwork.org/home_buyers.asp.

⁴⁷ For example, the Clinic successfully litigated on behalf of a Maryland neighborhood in which there were a large number of chemical companies. The Clinic's goal was to have those companies and the government buy out the property of the homeowners living in the heavy industrial area. Yet the Clinic, because of its policy of not representing individuals, was not able to represent the individual homeowners in their property sales. It was, however, able to refer these people to the network to have their property sales handled by network attorneys.

members know many of the network members personally, they know that the cases will be handled professionally and at affordable rates.

The combination of the Clinic handling litigation on behalf of organizations, and the network members representing individuals affected by the litigation, provides the Maryland community with a true continuum of service. There is clearly a healthy synergy between the work of the Clinic and the network attorneys. One Clinic faculty member commented that this interplay between the Clinic and the network "makes access to justice real," and feels that the network allows her to "expand services to the people I serve."

C. Benefits to the Participating Law Schools

There are numerous benefits to the participating law schools that result from the creation of these practitioner networks by law schools.

1. *Providing Students with Exposure to New Kinds of Practice*

Law school practitioner networks demonstrate the viability of alternative career paths. Many law students are frustrated by a dearth of in public interest job opportunities.⁴⁸ Similarly, many graduates are leaving the legal profession as a result of career dissatisfaction.⁴⁹ The network participants are vital role models for students, performing public interest work in a private practice setting. The practitioners create access for students to valuable internships and other practice opportunities, as well as a gateway into an established community of practitioners.

One second-year student spoke about the fact that many students are afraid to pursue public interest work because of the debt load they carry. Her contact with network members helped clarify her career goals. The network members demonstrate that there are opportunities to do the kind of work she wanted to do in the private as well as public sector. In addition, one clinical faculty member commented that as a result of her involvement with the network, she now spends more time having her clinic students engage in career assessment and planning and is able to give them more information about solo and small-firm practice.

Another student, who participated in Maryland's Law Practice Management Course,⁵⁰ stated that, as a result of participating in the class, he is now inspired to actively pursue solo practice . . . I realize the process is difficult . . . as a career move but from what I've learned in class, it appears to be worth [it]. In response to your question about what I learned from the class, the biggest thing I've learned is that it is not a 'solo' practice but an 'independent' practice because of all the available assistance [from the network]. I had no idea that there was so much support for a would-be independent law practitioners."

2. *Providing Faculty Members with Data About the Realities of Legal Practice and Enriching Law School Curricula*

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Erin Grace, Student Picks Service Over 6-Figure Salary, Omaha World-Herald, Feb. 26, 2001, at 9 (mentioning that the lack of public interest jobs is one reason why there is a shortage of public interest lawyers).

⁴⁹ Jonathan Kay, Working 7/24, That's No Way to Make a Living, Nat'l Post, Jan. 23, 2002, at FP8.

⁵⁰ *Infra* Part C.2.

Exposure to network practitioners provides faculty members with important data about the realities of law practice, the needs of their graduates, current trends in the legal profession (especially technology trends), and law practice management. All of this information can be incorporated into their school's curriculum and their faculty scholarship. One faculty member commented that involvement with the network presented a "window into a kind of practice I had no window into . . . [I]t definitely has given me lots of food for thought and changed my focus in teaching."⁵¹

The University of Maryland Law School project director developed and presents a law practice management course, designed for students interested in starting a solo or small-firm practice, in which network members share their experiences in starting, marketing, and operating their own practices.⁵² This course not only includes practical information about opening a law office, but also teaches students how to use time-keeping software as well.⁵³ The course was oversubscribed even before the registration period had ended. Similarly, the Northeastern Law School's clinical director, in conjunction with the Economic Development network's project director, created and taught a law practice management course geared toward students interested in developing financially viable practices that serve underrepresented communities.⁵⁴

3. Strengthening Connections to the Practicing Bar and Alumni

At Northeastern Law School, the Domestic Violence model was developed as a combined effort of the Law School's Domestic Violence Institute and the Women's Bar Association. Although the Institute had previously worked with many of the practitioners, the meetings to plan the project revitalized existing relationships and formalized a joint commitment to improving representation for domestic violence victims.⁵⁵ The project increased the visibility of the institution among, and strengthened its relationships with the private bar and bar associations. One faculty member noted, "[T]o some extent there is a gulf between academics and the practicing bar who see academics as in an ivory tower. [The project] helped alleviate that dynamic . . . [There is now] more trust and a closer relationship. We have built relationships that we can use for other collaborations and to pool resources."

By providing support and services to alumni through the network, participating law schools can develop stronger ties with their graduates. One network member described the network as "a big alumni association [in which] the alumni are more actively involved [than typical alumni associations]." As alumni become involved in the practitioner network, it brings them closer to the law school in other ways as well. Alumni have not only enlisted as mentors in the practitioner networks, but network

⁵¹ In fact, as a direct result of its interactions with the network, the CUNY Law School faculty now has a better understanding of the necessity for its graduates to become technologically proficient and is incorporating this understanding into its work with students.

⁵² Syllabus for Law Practice Management Course, designed by Adjunct Professor Denis Murphy, University of Maryland School of Law (2000) (on file with author).

⁵³ Id.

⁵⁴ Interview with Professor Jim Rowan (Fall 2001) (on file with author); Syllabus for Law Practice Management Course, designed by Professor James Rowan and Ken Forde, (Spring 2001) (on file with author).

⁵⁵ Domestic Violence Grant Awarded to Northeastern School of Law and Two Legal Services Agencies, FOREFRONT, Fall 1999, <http://www.alumni.neu.edu/forefront/9909/domestic.html>.

members have happily served as adjunct faculty members to help teach law office management courses and spokespersons at admissions recruiting functions and on career services panels. Having alumni involved in law school functions is critical to successful alumni fund-raising efforts. According to one faculty member, the existence of the project “gives life to the notion that the institution is a community [that does not] end when graduates cross the stage.”

The networks’ relationship with the law school can have employment-related benefits as well. As the network grows and members’ practices develop, they provide additional sources of employment for new graduates. One former Maryland Law School student who participated in the law practice management course contacted the project director about employment opportunities and was hired by one of the network members shortly after a notice was posted on the network’s listserv.

4. Creating a Synergistic and Beneficial Relationship Among Participating Law Schools

Law school-supported networks support and benefit important law school functions. As a result of its relationship with the network, the University of Maryland Law School’s Economic, Housing, and Community Development Clinic receives valuable case referrals from network members. These case referrals (some of them high profile) provide Clinic students with interesting educational experiences. In addition, both the CUNY and Northeastern Domestic Violence networks provide student interns to network members. This creates valuable, practical and experiential internship opportunities.

At CUNY, the network has developed an important relationship with the Law School’s admissions office. CUNY utilizes the network in its recruitment efforts by publicizing it in marketing materials and having network members speak at Admissions Office functions.⁵⁶ As a result, some applicants cite the network in their admissions applications as a reason for applying there. This clearly provides the Law School with a valuable recruitment and marketing tool.

5. Helping Law Schools Contribute to Social Justice and Serve Their Communities

Many individuals are drawn to the legal profession and legal education as a way to contribute to social justice and serve their communities.⁵⁷ Being involved with the practitioner networks enables faculty members and administrators to realize their personal missions of instilling professional values of access to justice by helping support professionals with a commitment to serve low and moderate-income individuals and communities.

IV. Conclusion

In a time when many decry the gap between the ivory tower of academia and the practicing lawyer,⁵⁸ the experiences of the founders of the Law School Consortium

⁵⁶ CUNY, *supra* note 4.

⁵⁷ Symposium, Amy Gutmann, Can Virtue be Taught to Lawyers?, 45 *Stan. L. Rev.* 1759, 1766 (1993).

⁵⁸ See John Caher, Bridge Linking Law Practice and Academia Fostered, *N.Y. L.J.*, Nov. 15, 2000. Participants in this convocation, which was the inaugural event of Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye’s Judicial Institute on the Profession, advocated two-way communication between academia and the practicing bar

Project demonstrate how that bridge may be built. If law schools across the nation provided similar support to solo and small-firm practitioners, both the legal profession and legal education could be transformed. Perhaps most importantly, law schools would play a significant role in increasing access to legal services for low and moderate-income individuals and communities.⁵⁹

and discussed the disconnect in which academics measure merit in terms of law review articles they write which practitioners rarely read. *Id.*

⁵⁹ Institutions interested in joining the Law School Consortium Project should contact Deborah Howard at 718-237-5777 or deborahhoward@earthlink.net.