

Ahead of the Curve: A Multi-Pronged Approach to Diversity and Inclusion

This week's Ahead of the Curve looks at a new partnership between the University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law and 30 Sacramento-area legal employers that aims to improve lawyer diversity and inclusion skills. Plus, an update on the use of the GRE in law school admissions.

By [Karen Sloan \(/author/profile/Karen-Sloan/\)](#) | January 26, 2021 at 12:29 PM

f Welcome back to **Ahead of the Curve**. I'm Karen Sloan, legal education editor at Law.com, and I'll be your host for this weekly look at innovation and notable developments in legal education.

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This week, I'm chatting with **University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law**

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Dean Michael Hunter Schwartz about the **Sacramento Legal Employers Diversity Collective**—a new initiative between the school and 30 local employers that aims to broaden the pipeline into the legal profession and help firms and legal organizations to recruit and retain diverse attorneys. Schwartz spoke with me about the

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importance of collaborating

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with employers to realize diversity gains. Next up, I'm checking in on the **GRE's** push into the law school admissions scene and where that stands.

Please share your thoughts and feedback with me at ksloan@alm.com (<mailto:ksloan@alm.com>) or on Twitter: [@KarenSloanNLJ](#)

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To Improve Lawyer Diversity, Get Employers on Board

For **Michael Hunter Schwartz**, dean of the **University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law**, the light bulb went off in the fall of 2019 after he formed a diversity board. A member of the newly convened board pulled him aside and said, **“If you really want to advance diversity in the legal profession, you need to get the legal employers involved.”**

That sounded right to Schwartz. Law schools for years have been working harder to recruit minority students, while legal employers have turned an eye to recruiting and retaining diverse lawyers. **But the legal profession is a continuum and it makes little sense for law schools and legal employers to be tackling diversity and inclusion in their own silos when they could collaborate toward a shared goal.**

By joining forces, law schools can ensure they are producing not only diverse graduates, but graduates with the diversity and inclusion skills employers want. Meanwhile, helping law schools bring in minority students will help legal employers ensure that the pool of law graduates from which they recruit represent the diversity of their area.

That’s the idea behind the **Sacramento Legal Employers Diversity Collective**, which McGeorge formally launched in December. Schwartz recruited 30 of the largest legal employers in Sacramento—a mix of local, national and international law firms; state agencies; and public defender and district attorney offices—for a four-pronged diversity initiative that Schwartz hopes will bear fruit in the coming years. The four components are:

- An expanded pipeline program (McGeorge dubs it a “pathway program”) that brings middle and high schools students to the law campus to learn about law as a career, and sends attorneys into schools to discuss law as a profession. McGeorge already has a pipeline program in place, but the participation and funding from the Collective participants will ensure the program reaches more schools and more students.
- The development of a set of best practices on recruiting and retaining diverse attorneys, who historically have higher attrition rates in legal settings than to white attorneys. The idea is for legal employers to share information on what is working and what isn’t on the recruiting and retention front. Once the Collective has developed best practices, it will conduct trainings and bring in speakers to help employers implement those steps.
- The launch of a “cross-employer mentoring program.” Many legal employers have mentoring for new attorneys within their organizations, but the Collective will seek to pair diverse attorneys with mentors at a different employer—ideally ones from a similar background. The Collective plans to partner with local affinity bar groups to help match up mentees and mentors.
- Conduct a survey of the equity and inclusion skills that employers want to see in new hires, then retool the law school curriculum to ensure that students are graduating with those skills.

I caught up with Schwartz earlier this month to discuss the Collective, and his enthusiasm was palpable. **The initiative is still in its early days but he is hopeful that the Collective can serve as a model for other law schools to better integrate their diversity efforts with that of their local legal community.**

“As we were thinking about what we wanted to do to really advance diversity, we realized we needed a bigger tent,” he said. “So I did 30 Zooms with 30 different legal employers, inviting them to work on the four projects. I thought, ‘With a lot more

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resources, we can do a lot more.”

Schwartz started by contacting the largest legal employers in the Sacramento area. Interestingly, he said only a handful did not respond to his inquiries. **The vast majority wanted to be involved. I take that as an acknowledgement that the status quo simply isn't working.** And we see that reflected in lawyer demographics. California is a majority-minority state, yet 68% of its lawyers are white. Schwartz told me that a quarter of the Sacramento-area population is Latinx, yet just 7% of its lawyers are.

I pressed Schwartz on how much muscle McGeorge and the Collective participants are going to put behind this. I've seen many diversity initiatives unveiled by law schools, bar organizations, law firms, and industry groups over the years. A hefty percentage of them start with a bang then fizzle over the years, or are abandoned when they don't produce measurable improvements early on. That is to say I'm a bit jaded when it comes to diversity initiatives, because they often feel like window dressing.

But Schwartz assured me that the Collective is a long-term project, though he allowed that some of its components will take longer to produce results than others. (The expansion of the pipeline program will likely have to wait until the COVID-19 pandemic gets under control.) But surveying employers on necessary diversity and inclusion skills and thinking through how to incorporate those into law schools need not wait, Schwartz said.

The Collective has been designed in one way that I think is smart and may help it outlast other diversity initiatives: Participating employers were asked to choose which of the four projects they wanted to be most involved in. So there are four subcommittees, each headed by someone from McGeorge. That cuts down on the time commitment of each participant, while ensuring they are working on the project that interests them the most or most aligns with their diversity goals. That should theoretically help the project retain momentum. I'll be interested to track the Collective's progress.

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