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COMMENTARY

The Case for Law School Sororities

While law schools have long provided a means for alumni to network and gather, Brooklyn Law School's Women's Leadership Network (WLN) has done much more. Other law schools, their alumnae, and law students can similarly benefit from creating something similar. Here's how.

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Career Development

By Debbie Epstein Henry

The truth is I never really liked law school. My favorite part of practicing law was lunch (which, admittedly, is equivalent to when my kids declared recess to be the best part of grade school). It's no surprise that I stopped practicing law more than 20 years ago. Yet it is curious that I've become very involved with my law school. But here's the thing. Aren't we all yearning for a sense of community, an opportunity to make an impact, and a means to ensure a more promising future? These are just a few of the things that got me back. I hope the same will hold true for you.

The path back to my legal alma mater started in 2017, when I co-founded Brooklyn Law School's Women's Leadership Network (WLN), a national alumnae and women law student initiative. I also became the inaugural chair of the law school's Women's Leadership Circle, which comprises roughly 35 alumnae who collaborate with law school administrators to run the WLN.

Why did we zero-in on women? For more than 20 years, women have represented nearly 50% or more of law school graduating classes, yet they are only 21% of equity partners, and women of color represent less than 4% of both equity and non-equity partners.

Women's representation outside of law firms is not much better. Women are 29% of the Fortune 1,000 general counsel, while women of color are merely 5%. In the lower federal courts, only 27% of sitting judges are women. And with women facing a disproportionate burden at home during the pandemic, female lawyers are leaving the profession in greater numbers and feeling more pressure to scale back due to the competing demands.

So, focusing on women is not about favoritism—it's about creating the stickiness in our professional lives to enable us to not only stay but also to thrive. Now, more than ever, law schools need to provide more organizational support for women.

While law schools have long provided a means for alumni to network and gather, the WLN has done much more. I'm confident that other law schools, their alumnae, and law students can similarly benefit from creating something equivalent to our organization. Here's how.

Build an Engaged Community

It's no longer enough that lawyers share an alma mater. Lawyers are more time-pressed than ever. To get lawyers interested in their law school community, law schools need to demonstrate why it's important for them to do so. What will benefit the lawyers to get involved and how can they find meaning through their participation? We've built an engaged community by focusing the WLN on four pillars: networking, programming, mentoring, and philanthropy.

Networking

- Tap Distinguished Alumnae. Who better to become ambassadors of a law school than the very women who have reached the pinnacle of their careers? Convening the Women's Leadership Circle to lead the WLN set the foundation for powerful networking opportunities for our alumnae that multiplies through our programming and mentoring initiatives. The influence of our network already has had a significant impact in business development and job opportunities for members and students as well as other professional and social connections.
- Include the Men. Men are critical to women's success, not only as observers but also as participants and leaders. Unless men see themselves reflected in the process, they won't be involved in it. In addition, when men are invested in women's success, more male role models will emerge to demonstrate how to ensure everyone in the profession succeeds.

Programming

- Develop the 'Fluff'. Lawyers often minimize the value of the "soft skills" that I affectionately call the "fluff," which is critical to any lawyer's success. These skills we should hone include sponsorship, self-advocacy, communication, networking, executive presence, and negotiation. It's not enough to focus on being a talented practitioner. The lawyers who distinguish themselves are those with these extra skills.
- Get Practical. We deliver practical programming, such as a recent virtual panel in "Shaping & Re-Shaping Your Career in a Pandemic-Influenced World." We also provide a forum to explore the experiences we're all grappling with, such as the program, "Working Remotely #AloneTogether," to share best practices for our rapidly evolving workplaces.

Mentoring

- For Alumnae. We've developed six mentoring circles for our alumnae including: Alternative Careers; Corporate and Compliance; Government and Regulatory Affairs; In-House Counsel; Media and Entertainment; and Real Estate. By having our alumnae self-determine the areas where they seek mini-communities to provide guidance, support, and knowledge, the return has been strong.
- For Students. To cultivate the next generation of women leaders and help the students succeed, we regularly invite members of our women law student network, the Legal Association for Women, to co-host and be included in our WLN events. By creating strong relationships with current students, we also strive to inculcate the lessons we hope these future leaders will emulate.

Philanthropy

- Create or Support a Scholarship. When we started the WLN, there wasn't a means to earmark contributions for a cause that would be especially meaningful to our group. Many of us, in turn, were less inclined to give. That changed when we announced our intention to have a 2022 graduate be our first WLN scholarship recipient. After naming our first scholar and announcing our plans to endow the scholarship in perpetuity, many more have committed to give.
- Inspire a Brighter Future. Beyond the scholarship, convening alumnae to do meaningful work collaboratively has inspired a more generous spirit to support our students and give to the law school more generally.

While many law schools are implementing various efforts to support women, I encourage them to instead make a commitment to invest in their alumnae with greater intentionality and in a more robust, comprehensive way. Now is the time to institutionalize our values and be deliberate about the kind of profession we're creating for the next generation. If others develop the type of women's leadership community that we at Brooklyn Law School have done through the Women's Leadership Network, I am confident that law schools will not only make a greater impact in the lives and careers of their students and graduates, but also in the relevance, investment, and future of their schools.

Debbie Epstein Henry is a lawyer turned entrepreneur, best-selling author, public speaker, and podcast host with an expertise in careers, women, workplace dynamics, and law. She is also co-founder and chair of Brooklyn Law School's Women's Leadership Network. Learn more about her work at www.debbieepsteinhenry.com.