

Creating Opportunities for Young Students Can Drive Diversity

In-house counsel should build a pipeline for diversity by creating opportunities for young students.

[Return To Article](#) [Reprints](#)

By [Laurie Robinson](#)
Published on 10/1/2010

In 2007, our general counsel (Louis J. Briskman, CBS Corp.) launched a pro bono and community service program in our offices around the country. In addition to providing legal services, the law department has adopted an elementary school located in lower Manhattan. Participation in this program has been exceedingly rewarding and enriching for the students, as well as for the lawyers in the department, including me.

In April, some of the lawyers in our law department attended a career day at the elementary school where we spoke to fourth and fifth graders—predominately African-American and Latino. At the start of the period, I polled the students by asking them, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Several of the young boys and girls enthusiastically responded that they wanted to be rappers, actresses, models, football stars and basketball players. I knew at that point that this career day would be a great opportunity to expose them to something new.

When we started talking to them about being a lawyer, they quickly went to a familiar place of reference: the television show "Law and Order." They also spent a lot of time asking about criminal law. We explained to them that the law has many practice areas to choose from: corporate, litigation, intellectual property, labor and employment, and more. Before we left, we emphasized the importance of focusing while in school and doing well in classes that will give them a good foundation—English, history and language arts. When the period was over, the students were fully engaged. By the time we walked out the door, they had changed their minds and exclaimed that they now wanted to be lawyers when they grew up!

That particular career day has stayed with me. It made clear what a difference lawyers can make in the lives of our young students by simply taking 30 minutes out of their schedules to talk to them and expose them to life, possibilities and the practice of law.

Reports indicate the enrollment of minority students to law school is on the decline as compared to the early 1990s. Based on what happened during my career day experience, I am convinced that lawyers need to do a better job of marketing our profession to attract the pipeline. The U.S. Army does it through its recruitment campaign—"Be All that You Can Be." Our profession should do the same if we want to capture the hearts and minds of our youngest constituents.

As in-house lawyers, we can start marketing our profession by creating pipeline programs within our corporate legal departments that will enable diverse elementary and high school students to gain exposure. Simple steps can make a tremendous difference. Begin by partnering with a school in your community. Bring students to your office; let them shadow you for a day; take them with you to meetings; let them meet other lawyers in your department; let them see you in action; and show them what a typical day is for you (without scaring them, of course).

I remember a couple of years ago our law department facilitated a field trip for our adopt-a-school's elementary students. We first took them to the Paley Center for Media, where they learned about the television industry. Afterward, we brought them to our offices. The young kids enjoyed a pizza lunch, excited to be in an office setting—many for the first time in their lives. The kids were also thrilled to be high up on the 19th floor where they could look out of the window down on the people and cars on the street below. I know that this exposure made a difference and changed them. It truly changed me as well.

If more corporate law departments open their doors to the pipeline, the impact on our profession will be huge, and we will feel it for many years to come. Start today.

Laurie N. Robinson is senior vice president and assistant general counsel at CBS Corp. and founder and CEO of Corporate Counsel Women of Color.