

How DC Firms Can Ready Diverse Lawyers for Life in Law, Politics

For diverse attorneys to have the chance to prepare for and thrive in D.C.-related positions, sponsorship and a focus on equity in development are key, Skadden's Shirley Diaz says.

BY CHRISTINE SCHIFFNER

*The National Law Journal has launched **Inadmissible**, a weekly Q&A series with Washington, D.C., legal professionals.*

This week, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom associate Shirley Diaz discusses her experience with DEI efforts at her firm and for Hispanic

attorneys in general. As the president-elect of the Hispanic Bar Association in Washington, D.C., she asks firms not only to foster a welcoming environment for young legal professionals but also beef up retention strategies.

NLJ: What is the issue and how does it intersect with Washington, D.C., politics?

Shirley Diaz: The issue is representation. The Hispanic Bar Association of D.C. conducted a survey in 2018 that showed that since 2002—which is when HBA-DC started tracking Hispanic attorneys in the District of Columbia—there has been stagnant growth among Hispanic attorneys in big law firms and in government. And that's important because a lot of the appointments for federal bench positions, for attorneys general, and executive branch appointments, are drawn

from a pool of qualified attorneys with specific types of experiences and work in both the federal government and private practice. That is why it is important to recruit and train Latinx talent in the legal profession, and prepare them for these types of roles.

NLJ: How has the issue been addressed?

SD: One of the challenges that lawyers will often cite is that not enough Hispanic students are pursuing law degrees—but the data doesn't necessarily support that. There's actually been a significant increase in students at ABA-accredited law schools. There are more Hispanic students but it will require more resources to attract the talent into law firms. At my firm, our leadership has deepened its commitment to recruiting underrepresented talent and we've expanded the IL Scholars Program, through which underrepresented first-year students join our summer associate program and work in-house with one of our clients. Those are the types of options and



Shirley Diaz, associate with Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.

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exposure to legal practice necessary to attract underrepresented law students to firms. We have to provide opportunities for students to gain exposure to the type of experiences needed to advance and succeed in certain areas of the legal profession.

Firms also need to invest in DEI inside the firm. Whether it's a director of diversity or having people plugged into various offices, it requires a lot of firm resources. When I picked my firm, it was because their Latinx affinity network is so strong. I received an email from every single member of the D.C. Latinx affinity group when I got an offer—offering to answer any questions and welcoming me to the firm should I take the offer.

That's the kind of infrastructure firms need and the kind of resources they need to get students interested—so that candidates say “that sounds like an environment where I will be welcome and that's an environment where I'm going to have the mentorship and sponsorship that I would need should I want to become partner or want a range of experiences that I can then go into government or in-house or wherever I'm going to go next.” And not all firms do that, as it requires a lot of firm resources to do that level of recruitment.

NLJ: What should be the strategy moving forward?

SD: The biggest issue is increasing the pipeline and that means starting with pre-law students.

It starts with exposing high school and college students to careers in the law and getting more students interested in going to law school. Pre-law mentorship programs, through which high school or undergraduate students are paired up with law student and/or attorney mentors, have been very successful. Similarly, programs like SEO and other internship opportunities for college students in law firms have also gained traction. Firms are increasingly extending their pipeline efforts

through partnership with these programs and, those students, whether they join the firm or not, are much better equipped to succeed in the market if they choose to pursue a legal career. Now that we're seeing an increased number of Hispanic students, it really is important that firms are expanding their recruiting resources.

A lot of these efforts require close partnership between the firm's recruiting and DEI teams and associates who are aligned with the various affinity groups. As a result, firms need to support those associates who are doing the diversity work that's needed to reach out to candidates to get offers and to plan events that foster a sense of community and belonging once they are at the firm. Skadden recognized that and, two years ago, started giving 50 hours of billable credit annually for diversity work. Getting credit for that kind of work is critical to ensure that underrepresented associates feel valued and seen for the significant investment we are making in our firms.

Retention and development are other critical issues that firms need to focus on. Associate levels are often very diverse, but then there is a drop-off at the partnership level. The solution is rooted in sponsorship and a focus on equity in development. For example, at Skadden, our global Latinx affinity network focuses its efforts on ensuring that our members are connected across offices so that mentorship and sponsorship relationships are not limited by geography. Also, our DEI and attorney development teams work closely on professional and leadership development programming.

I think recognizing associates through billable credit for the work they are doing and having really good firm infrastructure that considers DEI at every level will allow us to move the needle on attracting talented Hispanic attorneys into our industry, help us to retain them and hopefully help them advance to the partnership level.