

Law schools are very diverse, so why aren't law firms?

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While the proportion of minority law school students is on the rise, especially at top-tier law schools, diversity numbers at major law firms have barely budged in recent years. According to the ABA approximately 20% of those who attended law school over the past two decades identified as minorities, and that proportion has recently increased to 30%. Many, including Harvard Law School, report minority students making up over 40% of their incoming classes. The 2018 Law360 Diversity Snapshot, however, recently found that only 15.8% of attorneys and 9.2% of partners at the more than 300 law firms identified as minorities. “What the data seems to say is a lot of minority attorneys just opt out of going the private practice or the ‘big law’ route.” says Rodriguez a feature reporter for Law360. She explained that the widespread aversion to private practice and major law firms by minority attorneys has a number of root causes. One could be the lack of minority representation they see within the country’s top firms, which might suggest a more difficult path to advancement. Another is the high-pressure environment, which is a deterrent to many that choose not to go into private practice or work for major firms, in spite of the higher-than-average pay. “A lot of times, what’s inspired them to go to law school is a local attorney who’s helped them with a family matter or an immigration case, or they know someone in the criminal justice system, so they’re being inspired to go into roles in government or nonprofit or perhaps civil practitioners.”

The industry isn’t blind to its diversity problem and has made concerted efforts to address the issue, though the results of those efforts are often difficult to find. More than 85% of firms surveyed have established a diversity committee that includes senior partners, and more than 30% employ a dedicated diversity professional. “In speaking with law firm leaders that are engaged on this issue, several express their frustration with the fact that the numbers haven’t been budging,” says Rodriguez. “Many are trying to broaden their recruiting efforts, institute unconscious bias training, create mentoring networks for minority attorneys, and some have even instituted the Mansfield Rule, which requires 30% of the candidates they consider for new positions to be from minority communities.

“There’s no one, clear, specific answer in terms of the profession as a whole,” explains Patricia Lee, the chair of the American Bar Association’s Diversity and Inclusion Center. “Each step in the attorney’s career journey—from high school to the LSAT exam to law school to the bar exam and up the ladder within the legal profession—has unique challenges when it comes to recruiting and retaining diverse students and employees. Complex as the problem may be, Lee believes it’s vital that the industry continues to strive for racial and gender equality at each stage and within each legal institution. “Attorneys have a greater impact even beyond the legal profession, because they’re looked to for their expertise in other areas of society in terms of elected officials, judges and so forth,” she says. “The more diverse attorneys you have, the more you ensure you have the widest possible viewpoint and cultural sensitivity when you try to implement policies in the public.” [...]