



## Firms Promote Diversity through Scholarships

With diversity in the workplace becoming an increasingly desirable goal, law firms are taking an active approach, offering minority scholarships to high school and law school students.

“A combined lack of funds, guidance, and opportunities can cause law school to seem like a pipe dream for minorities,” the Minority Corporate Counsel Association said in a statement on its website. “Without incentives to interest minority students in the vocation, scholarships to fund law school, mentors to open eyes to the various areas within the field, and internship and employment opportunities—all of which various scholarship programs normally offer—ethnic diversity among law students stagnates.”

“Without an able-bodied student pool to recruit from, diversity within the profession languishes. And without diversity in the profession, the ability to fully meet the needs of an increasingly diverse world will become increasingly rare,” the association stated.

Steeffel, Levitt & Weiss, a firm based in San Francisco, is about to celebrate its 25-year anniversary; and as part of the celebration, it will also offer its first scholarship. Partnering with the University of California, Berkeley’s Boalt Hall, the firm has announced the first annual Steeffel, Levitt & Weiss Diversity Scholarship.

The scholarship will award \$25,000 annually to a law student going into his or her second year of law school. To qualify, the student must display exceptional academic standing and financial need. Partiality will be given to minority students.

“Our hopes and expectations with the founding of this scholarship are that it benefits deserving students and hopefully helps to develop diverse and talented leaders for tomorrow’s legal industry,” James Eastman, Managing Partner, said.

Eastman said the scholarship was not created with recruitment in mind but simply to offer financial assistance to a qualified law student from a diverse background.

“As an institution, you are only at your best when each individual brings something different to the table—whether it be experience or perspective,” he said. “Beyond the social significance, diversity is also critical to a law firm’s livelihood. In order to thrive in today’s business world, it’s imperative that companies reflect the communities they serve. In California, that need is compounded by the fact that we are the most diverse state in the country. It takes a diverse team of attorneys and staff to meet the needs of a diverse client base. So, at the end of the day, workplace diversity is both the smart thing to do and the right thing to do.”

Eastman said the firm will consider offering more than one scholarship in the future based on the results of the first one.

Kirkland & Ellis, LLP, a firm with offices in the United States as well as abroad, is also committed to diversity. Through its minority scholarship program, the firm has offered 16 scholarships through Northwestern University School of Law and the University of Chicago Law School, totaling \$304,000.

The firm's 40-member diversity committee is responsible for managing the firm's resources in a way that create a diverse working environment, and that means making funds available for minority students to attend law school.

"The Diversity Committee's focus is the recruitment, retention, and promotion of attorneys in a manner that promotes diversity at all levels within the firm," the firm said in a statement on its website.

Vinson & Elkins, LLP, is yet another firm that offers minority scholarships. One of the largest international firms in the world, Vinson & Elkins created the scholarship program in 1990. Each year since then, the firm has awarded six \$10,000 scholarships to minority students in Texas.

"In the 16 years since, 85 Latino, African-American, and other minority students from Austin, Dallas, and Houston have used the V&E scholarships to attend the University of Texas, Rice University, Southern Methodist University, Harvard University, Yale University, Stanford University, Princeton University, and other colleges throughout the nation," the firm's website stated.

The scholarships, which provide students with \$2,500 a year for four years, are awarded to students who are interested in the field of law. In addition, the firm gives scholarship recipients the opportunity to work at the firm during the summer.

"V&E recognized that it needed to get involved at an earlier stage than law school to further its objective of promoting diversity within the firm and in the profession by increasing the presence in the law schools of minority students," said Yolanda Chavez Knull—a partner who chairs the firm's wills, trusts, and estates practice group—in a statement on the firm's website.

"We targeted the program to high school seniors who showed promise and an interest in pursuing a legal education and who otherwise might not be able to attend the college of their choice. As many of the scholarship candidates did not have role models who were professionals, we integrated a summer internship and mentoring program into our scholarship package as additional tools to assist our scholars in reaching their goals," she said.

James A. Reeder Jr., a partner at V&E and a chair on the firm's scholarship committee, said he thinks the scholarships have definitely achieved the firm's goal of promoting diversity.



“A very large percentage of the kids who have received our scholarships have gone on to law school and are now practicing law. These are kids who may not have had the resources to go to college at all,” he said. “Additionally, by giving them a job in the summer while they are in college, we have exposed them to the workings of a law firm, which also has hopefully contributed to their resolve to go to law school.”

Students who have received the scholarships in the past have gone on to become lawyers, investment bankers, teachers, and business leaders.

Reeder thinks it's important for law firms to offer scholarships, not only to promote diversity but to give students the chance to fulfill their dreams.

“Scholarships often provide the only chance a young man or woman has to go to college,” he said. “Depending upon what a particular law firm wants to promote, it can often be achieved by just providing the means to allow one student to go to college who would not have had that chance but for the scholarship.”

Additional information on the scholarships mentioned in this article and other law firm scholarships is available through your school's financial aid office.