

Faculty of Federal Advocates Newsletter

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Judges' Corner

LAW SCHOOL ... Sí Se
Puede - "Yes, We Can":

Building the Pipeline for a
Representative Legal
Profession. By United
States District Judge
Christine M. Arguello

Issue: 2016/2

May 2016

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LAW SCHOOL ... Sí Se Puede - "Yes, We Can": Building the Pipeline for a Representative Legal Profession

By United States District Judge Christine M. Arguello

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Lady Justice is not blind. She is blindfolded. The veil is meant to symbolize the ideal of impartiality that undergirds our judicial system, and that compels judges to render decisions without regard to race, gender, or creed. But while she may wear a blindfold, we plainly see *who* Justice is, and in a country that grows more diverse each year, judicial decision makers are increasingly unrepresentative of the diverse communities bound by our laws.

According to a recent Columbia Law School report, there has been an 11% decrease in law school attendance for African and Mexican-American students in recent years. And the "shut out" rate for these populations-*i.e.*, the rate at which these students are not accepted to any law school-has seen dramatic recent increases.

Growing stratification in the legal profession should alarm any person interested in promoting a judicial system that reflects the incredible diversity of our country, as perceptions of inequity necessarily erode the fundamental idea-etched in stone at the entrance to our highest court-that we can *all* expect "equal justice under the law." Because our laws are the glue that makes civilization possible, a legal profession that reflects the great diversity of our communities is critical

[Mission of the Faculty of Federal Advocates](#)

The Faculty of Federal Advocates (FFA) is an organization of attorneys dedicated to improving the quality of legal practice in the federal courts in Colorado by enhancing advocacy skills, professionalism, and the integrity of practice.

The FFA provides continuing legal education classes, mentoring and pro bono opportunities, and other support services to foster and demonstrate commitment to the highest standards of advocacy and professional and ethical conduct. The FFA promotes support, mentorship, education, and camaraderie for federal court practitioners.

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to the health of our nation.

So, we must ask - what can be done to address diversity in the legal profession and the judiciary? Since I was appointed to the bench, I have headed a group of lawyers and law students called the "Arguello Dream Catchers." We have given presentations to hundreds of public school students across Colorado with the goal of sparking an interest in the legal profession. As a result of these presentations, we met many high school students who expressed an interest in studying law. Many of them, however, came from backgrounds that are not typically predictive of a career in the law - most were low-income and often the first in their family to graduate from high school, much less college. Having come from similar backgrounds, we understood that these students had no idea what they needed to do to prepare themselves for law school, and that they lacked mentors who could help guide them along the way. We also realized that, although we had worked hard to achieve our success as lawyers, serendipity played a significant role in our success. We decided that the future success of these hardworking, very capable students need not be left to chance; rather, members of the Colorado Bar could become the "serendipity" that these students needed to succeed in accomplishing their dreams of becoming lawyers.

In May of 2014, we created *LAW SCHOOL ... Sí Se Puede*. "*Sí, Se Puede!-Yes, We Can!*" is a phrase born of hunger-striking farmworkers, who fought valiantly for equal protection under the law. *LAW SCHOOL...Sí Se Puede* stands for a beautiful principle: that our Colorado legal community can stand together in an important mission. It is a mission that law firms, law schools, and the legal profession as a whole have struggled with for years: our inability to cultivate a legal community as diverse as the population bound by our laws.

LAW SCHOOL ... Sí Se Puede is an innovative four-year mentorship program designed to advance inclusiveness in the legal profession by equipping Colorado high school

graduates from diverse backgrounds with the knowledge and contacts they need to become highly qualified applicants for admission to the nation's best law schools. *LAW SCHOOL ... Sí Se Puede* is the first law school pipeline program of its kind in both Colorado and the United States - a program that targets high-achieving college freshman from diverse backgrounds, pairs those students with mentors, and facilitates training and skill-building for four years.

Realizing that 30% of freshman students drop out of college and that the percentage is even higher for minority, low-income, and first-generation college students, we decided to target our efforts at rising college students, and to focus on promoting inclusiveness at the defining gateway for future ministers of justice: admission to law school.

Each *LAW SCHOOL ... Sí Se Puede* Fellow receives intensive interventions, including four years of mentoring by a two-lawyer/one-law-student team, and hard and soft skills development and exposure programming to ensure his or her undergraduate success and an understanding of the importance of 1) developing emotional intelligence and a professional identity, 2) establishing personal and professional relationships, and 3) building leadership skills and credentials through community service and professional internships.

Our research also indicates that diverse students face a "shutout" rate in the law school admissions process of between 45-60%, due primarily to low LSAT scores. That is, these students receive no offers from the law schools to which they apply or, if admitted, do not receive the financial assistance necessary to help them afford law school.

Thus, in the Fellows' junior year of college, we ensure that they understand what is at stake when they take the LSAT, in terms of law school admission and scholarship assistance. We also teach them how to research law schools to find the best fit for them. The main focus, however, is on developing LSAT competence via a comprehensive LSAT study plan/schedule, assistance with the cost of an LSAT prep

course, supplementation of the prep course studies with multiple practice exams, and regular sessions with an LSAT tutor who will teach them how to analyze and break down the questions, in particular those pertaining to logical reasoning and the logic games questions. During the Fellows' senior year, the focus of the mentoring and workshops is to prepare them psychologically and intellectually for success in law school, including how to study for law school, how to read and analyze cases, and an assessment of their writing skills.

All of *LAW SCHOOL ... Sí Se Puede's* Fellows come from backgrounds under-represented in the law: they are low-income, of color, and/or first-generation high school or college students. Thus, they lack access to the types of people and experiences that allow their more privileged peers to discern a career in the law and create the caliber of resumé that will attract attention from a law school admissions counselor. Of the current 25 Fellows in the program, 76% are women of color, 16% are African American, 76% are Hispanic, and 92% will be first-generation college graduates.

What is our common challenge that motivated creation of *LAW SCHOOL...Sí Se Puede*? It is a drowning, delegitimizing "no" that many bright minds hear in response to their tentative testimony that, "yes, I want to be a lawyer."

It is a "no" that others have delivered to our Fellows because these young people do not fit the mold of what someone thinks a lawyer should be. It is a sometimes deafening "no" that comes from within our Fellows, who fight not to internalize the message that they are not good enough to be a lawyer because they have never met one before.

And it is a "no" that *LAW SCHOOL...Sí Se Puede* meets with the resounding "*Sí, Se Puede*" of nearly one hundred lawyers who have come together to dedicate time and treasure in making the dream of law school a reality for our Fellows. This communal "yes" is delivered at a crucial juncture in the lives of many lawyers: their college years. And yet it is a necessary reaffirmation of a dream that is missed by many a student, because no program like this has

existed before.

LAW SCHOOL...Sí Se Puede is a paradigm shift - a new model and way of thinking that will benefit society and the legal community as a whole: it will change how minorities are viewed and treated by our judicial system. *LAW SCHOOL...Sí Se Puede* is about creating professional bonds stronger than the stigmas that can hold us back. The Fellows and mentors involved in *LAW SCHOOL...Sí Se Puede* will be the agents of change for the future.

I thank those of you who are already involved as mentors and supporters of *LAW SCHOOL ... Sí Se Puede*. I invite those who are interested in becoming involved to go to <http://lawschoolsisepuede.org/> and send us an email. With your help, *Sí Se Puede!*

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