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## Partnership. Legal Pipeline. Progress. Diversity: A Marathon Worth Running

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As I debated on the perfect introduction for this article, the movie *42* — depicting the life of legendary Jackie Robinson — instantly sprang to mind. Unmistakably, Branch Rickey's efforts to diversify baseball in the 1940s serve as a prime illustration of what's required from all of us today, particularly in the ongoing dialogue on the legal pipeline.

Over the past several years, the topic of diversity in the legal profession has received widespread attention. Law firms, corporations and other legal employers have attempted, with varying levels of success, to increase the diversification of their associate and partner ranks.

While the progress has been slow, now more than ever, we must stay the course. As members of an interconnected legal, business and education community, we should strive to work collaboratively to address these issues. Moving forward, a critical aspect of this process will require a renewed focus on the legal profession pipeline.

The Dallas Diversity Task Force, a group made up of representatives from three minority legal associations in Dallas — the J.L. Turner Legal Association (JLTLA), the Dallas Hispanic Bar Association (DHBA) and the Dallas Asian American Bar Association (DAABA) released its annual report in October 2013. The report measures law firm diversity within the 20 largest firms in Dallas. In 2013, the results indicate that levels of diversity have dropped overall. As the Task Force brainstormed potential solutions to this reversal of progress, a familiar topic came to the forefront of the discussions — the legal profession pipeline.



Emmanuel Obi

### Unblocking the Pipeline

Sadly, a different type of pipeline is in operation in Dallas, one often referred to as the cradle to prison pipeline. It is described as an anecdotally pervasive and empirically verifiable social construct that makes it more likely for children born in certain Dallas neighborhoods to end up in a Texas prison than in college.

Educational data substantiates this point. According to the Commit! Partnership, a coalition of more than 100 organizations working together to

drive student achievement throughout Dallas County, third grade reading competence is a highly predictive indicator of a child's future prospects.

In fact, national statistics indicate that children reading below grade level in third grade are less likely to go on to college. In 2011, for example, only 42 percent of third graders in Dallas County read at their grade level. There is also a wide achievement gap between students of color and white students (61 percent of white students scored "commended" on the 2011 TAKS 3rd Grade Reading assessment, compared to 39 percent of Hispanic students and 31 percent of African American students).

"Our community cannot meaningfully strengthen its cradle-to-career educational pipeline without first building strong readers by third grade and addressing racial disparities in achievement," said Jonathan Feinstein, Commit!'s director of community engagement.

### **Priming the Pipeline – Example Initiatives**

Currently, each Task Force member organization routinely endeavors to promote pipeline programs, but a greater impact can be made with additional support and resources. Each year, the JLTLA Foundation hosts its annual gala — a fundraiser for raising money to 1) award merit and need-based scholarships to minority college and law students, and 2) fund other critical pipeline programs.

Since its inception, the JLTLA Foundation has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in support of this scholarship program, as well as other pipeline initiatives, including Street Law — an innovative program that educates elementary school children on basic constitutional law and other legal topics, such as safely interacting with law enforcement.

On Nov. 5, 2013, JLTLA, in collaboration with several area high schools, colleges, law schools and law firms, hosted its inaugural Pre-Law Initiative. Approximately 60 attendees (mostly aspiring lawyers) attended a dynamic day of programming featuring a law school admissions panel, law firm tours and a networking mixer. With increased support and resources, JLTLA hopes to expand this Program and make it an annual event. (The following link is a highlight video of the event: <https://vimeo.com/79847341> )

"In order to do our part to ensure that our children have access to a legal education and ultimately a legal career, we must first make ourselves visible in underprivileged communities, so that aspiring attorneys understand that a career in law is more than just a far-fetched dream, but a reality," said Tatiana Alexander, incoming 2014 JLTLA president and a member of the 2013 Task Force.

### **DHBA**

The DHBA is also actively addressing pipeline issues.

In May, the DHBA and the Hispanic Law Foundation raised more than \$100,000 during the inaugural Amanacer Scholarship Luncheon. The money raised at this event was used to fund five student scholarships, one student bar review study grant, five internships with Dallas County judges (enabling students to gain critical clerking experience and earn a decent stipend in the process) and special grants that were awarded to the Law Magnet High School in Dallas and the Sarah T. Hughes Foundation.

"Filling the pipeline will require making a legal education affordable again," 2013 Task Force Chair Rosa Orenstein said. "It is astronomically high. In the meantime, the least we can do as established professionals is help students defray these costs with financial assistance in the form of scholarships, grants and stipends."

### **DAABA**

Like JLTLA and DHBA, the DAABA is also involved in pipeline initiatives. For instance, each year DAABA awards a scholarship to help a qualified Asian American law student with expenses related to obtaining a legal education.

DAABA routinely works with the Dallas Independent School District on career day presentations to encourage elementary and middle school children to consider a career in the law.

As part of this outreach, each year DAABA also awards the Taryn Vu Outstanding Youth Award and Scholarship, recognizing a high school student who has made exceptional contributions to the community or exhibited other qualities and characteristics extraordinary for his or her age or circumstances.

### **Fairway to Success – An Example Worth Emulating**

The Task Force found that other community businesses and organizations have developed specialty programs to improve the diversity pipeline.

One that is making significant progress is Fairway to Success (FTS), an outreach program at three Dallas Independent School District high schools — W.W. Samuel, Thomas Jefferson and Lincoln.

FTS aims to improve the graduation rates at these high schools and provide access to college for students who might not otherwise be able to pursue a higher education. The program, funded by the generous contributions of Deloitte professionals, includes exposing students to golf and key life lessons: discipline, honor and integrity.

FTS also facilitates student interaction with Deloitte mentors who serve as role models eager to share experiences gained from working in a professional services environment. Mentors help students explore potential career opportunities in various fields of study.

FTS also created the Deloitte Justin Leonard Scholarships. The 2013 recipients were announced earlier this year, and each received a \$20,000 Scholarship to use toward a four-year college degree.

“It’s an ongoing opportunity for Deloitte professionals to have a positive impact on local Dallas ISD students who have excelled in their high school experiences and help them to pursue their goals of college and a successful career,” said Jason Downing, Deloitte’s North Texas managing partner.

“It’s a gift of time, money and inspiration that pays dividends to the students, classmates, teachers, coaches and Deloitte volunteers,” he added.

### **A Call to Action**

While these organizations and other community stakeholders are hard at work addressing pipeline issues and advancing other aspects of the diversity and inclusion debate, there is so much more to be done and strategic partners (like you) are needed in this regard. As such, moving forward, the Task Force, using the critical information and insights gained from its annual report, will continue to find innovative ways to partner with other community stakeholders, including schools and businesses, to impact change — a strategy predicated on a keen focus on pipeline, partnership and *progress*.

Addressing diversity challenges in the legal profession requires a marathon mentality. As a community of individuals, organizations and businesses, we have a firm obligation to forge and leverage strong *partnerships* to advance critical diversity issues, including unclogging the legal *pipeline*. In the process, we will achieve a new level of *progress*.

To accomplish this, we must follow the example of pipeline pioneers like Branch Rickey — a lawyer whose analytical thinking skills, fueled by his steadfast faith, effected transformative change on the game of baseball, the civil rights movement and the world at large. To do this, we must exemplify a

few key diversity and pipeline best practices – namely leadership involvement, accountability and sustained commitment.

We *ALL* have a part to play, and if we individually do that, the aggregate result will be sustained progress and the continued leveling of the legal professional playing field. So, what are you waiting for? You're up to bat! Hit a home run for the legal profession pipeline by getting involved in some way.

*Emmanuel U. Obi is an attorney in the public finance group of Norton Rose Fulbright's Dallas office and serves as bond counsel, underwriter's counsel and disclosure counsel in a myriad of public finance matters.*

*If you are interested in finding out more about how you or your organization can become more directly involved with advancing pipeline issues impacting the Dallas area, Mr. Obi can be reached at [eobi.esq@gmail.com](mailto:eobi.esq@gmail.com).*

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