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Strengthening the Future of Louisiana’s Legal Community: LSBA’s Bar Admissions Education Initiative Receives 2009 ABA Professionalism Award

NEW ORLEANS—Educating Louisiana law students today on the stringent Bar Admissions “character and fitness” requirements will strengthen the foundation of an ethical, professional and responsible legal community tomorrow. To successfully accomplish this aim, the Louisiana State Bar Association’s (LSBA) Committee on the Profession rolled out its Bar Admissions Education Initiative in spring 2008 — a program specifically designed to help focus future lawyers early on in their law school career on the absolute importance of guarding their ethical and professional character and reputation.

Today (July 31), the American Bar Association (ABA) nationally honored Louisiana’s initiative, awarding it one of only three 2009 E. Smythe Gambrell Professionalism Awards. The ABA’s Standing Committee on Professionalism presents the annual award to recognize projects contributing to the understanding of professionalism among lawyers and to ensure the maintenance of the highest principles of integrity and dedication in the legal profession. LSBA officials believe Louisiana is the only state to have this type of program.

Under the LSBA Bar Admissions Education Initiative, various sectors of Louisiana’s legal community collaborate to allow young lawyers, *while they are still students in law school*, to go through special training and screenings, such as one-on-one ad hoc panels, to help identify potential “red flags” in students’ backgrounds, so they can address integrity or potential professionalism problems at the earliest stage in their careers as lawyers. This successful collaboration allows law students to be schooled comprehensively and early in their careers about why this “character and fitness” segment of the bar admissions application process is so important to their future profession.

While the initiative is voluntary for first-year law students, the majority of incoming Louisiana law students

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took full advantage of the opportunity to learn more about the National Conference of Bar Examiners Character and Fitness Investigation, a new bar admissions requirement adopted by the Louisiana Supreme Court. In 2008, collectively, a total of 84 percent of incoming students at the state's four law schools participated in the initiative — specifically, 96 percent participation at Tulane University Law School; 79 percent at Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center; 78 percent at Loyola University College of Law; and 82 percent at Southern University Law Center.

The award, presented today at the ABA's Annual Meeting in Chicago, Ill., was accepted by LSBA Committee on the Profession Chair Barry H. Grodsky of New Orleans and LSBA Immediate Past President Elizabeth Erny Foote of Alexandria.

“The award symbolizes the commitment of the LSBA to those aspiring to practice law in Louisiana to assist them through this difficult (bar admissions) process and to help them with personal issues that can impact their right to be admitted to practice,” Grodsky said. “We are very proud of what this program has accomplished and hope that the recognition through this award will inspire others to provide similar programs for aspiring lawyers in their states,” he added.

The LSBA completed the initiative's second round of programs in spring 2009. The initiative augments the LSBA's two other law school professionalism programs — the third-year professionalism program and the first-year professionalism orientations. The three programs, as a unit, offer a seamless continuum in the concept of professionalism, allowing the LSBA to have a meaningful presence in the legal education of future lawyers.

The bar admissions initiative “has a direct impact on the quality of our profession and demonstrates to students that the LSBA is a valuable career resource and partner,” Foote said. “This program plants the seed early on in the students' careers that ethics, professionalism and character matter in the practice of law,” she added.

“Successfully entering the ranks of legal professionals now requires much more than three years of law school and passing the Bar exam,” said LSBA President Kim M. Boyle of New Orleans. The LSBA's leadership early on “recognized the opportunities of assisting future members of the legal profession to practice with integrity and professionalism,” she said. The Bar Admissions Initiative also dovetails with the LSBA's other missions of upholding the honor of the courts and the profession and promoting the professional competence of attorneys, she added.

Because character and fitness issues often are linked to issues of addiction and mental health, the Lawyers' Assistance Program, Inc. (LAP) also is a major component of the initiative. Through the LAP, Louisiana lawyers may seek confidential and practical assistance with addictions or mental health issues that threaten to negatively impact their professional relationship with their clients. Law students consult with LAP representatives to learn how to mitigate past histories of addiction or mental health issues. LAP then refers the students to independent evaluators.

“This initiative has forged an alliance of the Louisiana disciplinary system, the Lawyers' Assistance Program, the state's four law schools and the LSBA which can only lead to future collaboration,” Foote said.

Louisiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Catherine D. Kimball expressed her belief that the long-term benefits of this initiative will prove to be substantial “as we at the Court will certainly see a reduction in attorneys

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who are disciplined for ethical violations or who are engaged in unprofessional conduct. Down the road, we are sure to see an increased level of professionalism among the bar.” For this major contribution to the legal profession, she added, “we offer our heartfelt thanks to the LSBA’s Committee on the Profession, and we again offer our congratulations to Beth Foote, Barry Grodsky, the LSBA leadership and everyone at the Bar who has been involved with the Bar Admissions Education Initiative for the receipt of this award. Well done!”

Law school representatives also commended the LSBA on its initiative on behalf of the law students.

“The Bar Admissions Education Initiative has become an integral part of the education that we provide to our law students each year,” said Jack M. Weiss III, chancellor of Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center. “It is especially important that our students hear from practitioners that the law is also about character and fitness, and that they will be trustees of the awesome power that law has to do good (or to do evil) once they are admitted to the bar. That choice one day will rest in their hands. The LSBA is to be commended for offering this worthwhile program that continues to serve our students and the long-term good of the profession,” Weiss added.

While attending bar admissions initiative sessions, LSU Law Center Vice Chancellor Cheney C. Joseph, Jr. noted that “the student questions reveal their intense interest and, to some extent, lack of awareness of the importance of maintaining a high regard for integrity and responsibility as they advance toward membership in the Bar. They gain an important insight into the difficulties raised by inappropriate youthful behavior. The excellent program makes them aware that, as law students, they are expected to behave as responsible future members of the Bar.”

Stephanie W. Jumonville, associate dean of students at Loyola University New Orleans College of Law, also was complimentary about the LSBA’s efforts. “Through this initiative,” she said, “hundreds of law students have been helped regarding the bar application process and the many questions attendant to it.”

Also receiving the 2009 Gambrell Award are the Denver and Colorado bar associations for a series of teaching professionalism vignettes and the Phoenix School of Law for its general practice skills course.

The Gambrell Award was established in 1991 and named for E. Smythe Gambrell, American Bar Association and American Bar Foundation president from 1955-56. He founded the Legal Aid Society in Atlanta, where he practiced law from 1922 until his death in 1986.

The Louisiana State Bar Association assists its more than 20,000 members in the practice of law. The statewide association, as part of its multi-faceted mission, promotes and maintains access to justice initiatives for the state’s residents, assists the Louisiana Supreme Court in its regulation of the practice of law, upholds the honor of the courts and the profession, and supports programs that increase public understanding of and respect for the law.

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