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Minorities find path to success

Latina law student at John Marshall starts study group for first-year peers

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A law student at The John Marshall Law School may have figured out a way to retain more students of color in law school, a problem that has be-deviled professors and administrators for years.

"I have just been shocked since I started teaching as to the significant attrition rate for students of color, blacks and Latinos in particular," said professor Rogelio A. Lasso.

"Disproportionately, the people who flunked out of law school from the time I was in law school (1982 to 1985) until now are blacks and Latinos.

"So in comes to my office this amazing dynamo of a young woman named Daissy Dominguez. She's not even my student. She says, 'Professor Lasso, I want to do something about this. I want to start a program to make sure Latino students who are starting with me are going to succeed.'"

Dominguez, 24, from the Northwest Side, started law school in August 2010.

Soon she was struggling, and she said "others were struggling. ... I realized some of my classmates, mainly minority, were dismissed because of academics. I know of two. They were African-American and Latino. Both women.

"That was kind of saddening to me. It was not because they were not trying. I didn't know what it was."

In the spring of 2011, Dominguez organized a study group for anyone from the Latino Law Student Association, which included 30 to 50 members. She got five volunteers.

Her study group met twice a

week for four weeks to review contracts, torts, constitutional law and civil procedure.

Lasso learned what Dominguez was doing.

She said he told her, "I really like this idea. I think we can make it into a program that has more structure," strictly for first-year students.

During the summer of 2011, Dominguez and Lasso designed a voluntary program for first-year students drawn only from the Latino Law Student Association who would meet twice weekly. The students who joined what became the Academic Enhancement Program (AEP) would be taught solely by 2L and 3L students in the 2011-2012 school year.

Once a week, the AEP students would get led in reviews by their student-instructors. In the other weekly session, the AEP students would take quizzes, both multiple choice and essays, that the students instructors graded.

"What makes the program different," Lasso said, "is the introduction of multiple assessments that provide students with one-on-one feedback on their performance."

Student instructors tell the first-year students "not only what the students did wrong, but how to do it right," he said.

This helps first-year students "develop the ability to come up with a strategy to resolve whatever issue they had on that assessment," Lasso said.

Grades on the quizzes do not count for the students' class grades.

Dominguez said she built the curriculum and hired all the instructors at \$12 an hour.

"We had in the first semester (of 2011-2012) four sections, about five students in each," Dominguez said. Each section had the same pro-

fessors and the same classes, a feature found only in the first year of law school.

AEP reviews and quizzes matched what the students' professors demanded. Students got one-on-one attention from their student instructors.

When Lasso first asked the administration for money to pay the instructors, he said he was told, "Can't do it. No money."

But Rory Dean Smith, associate dean for outreach and planning at John Marshall, said he'd find the money. And he did.

Another rule for any student who wished to participate in AEP, Lasso said, was "if people do not show up twice or do not turn in two assignments, they are out, and they are out for good."

Dominguez said three cuts is the elimination factor for AEP.

Minority students are "challenged by what is known as stereotype threat," Smith said, "which manifests in test anxiety, discomfort in speaking up, diminished self-confidence and becoming withdrawn and disconnected."

"The unique thing" about AEP, he said, "is this is done in a fashion where students immediately feel comfortable. They are in a non-threatening environment where they are not worried about what people think about them. They are just worried about getting the work done. For students of color, it's important to have this safe harbor."

John Marshall has long offered a voluntary review program called Insights, Lasso said, run by assistant professor Jamie A. Kleppetsch.

The well-known problem, Lasso said, has been "people who need the most help are usually least likely to seek it."

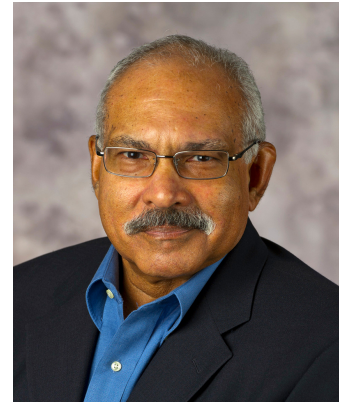
Kleppetsch supplied many of the assessment tests for AEP.

The first true semester of AEP, fall 2011, "went really great," Dominguez said. "All of them did very well. They all passed through into second semester."

Lasso said, "we saw dramatic change in students' self confidence." He said one AEP student may have flunked out.

Some students from AEP have gotten into honors program, law review, moot court and executive board positions in student organizations, Dominguez said.

In the current semester, AEP expanded to allow members of the Black Law Students Association



Rogelio A. Lasso



Daissy Dominguez



Rory Dean Smith

and the Middle Eastern Law Students Association to join. Any student, no matter what race, can belong to any of those groups, Lasso said.

Dominguez said presidents of Latino student organizations at other law schools asked her to help them start the program at their schools.

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