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News/Columns

Law Students Performed 2.2 Million Pro Bono Hours Last Year

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In between reading cases and studying for exams, law students found time in 2016 to take on volunteer legal work — a lot of it.

The law class of 2016 performed more than 2.2 million hours of pro bono work while on campus, which is valued at more than \$52 million.

That's according to new figures compiled by the Association of American Law Schools (AALS), which polled all American Bar Association-accredited law schools in November to find out how much pro bono work their recent graduates did. It's the first time a nationwide student pro bono survey has been conducted, according to AALS Director of Communications James Greif.

"I think it really shows what the value of law schools is to communities, beyond just training the next generation of lawyers," Greif said. "These are services that would not exist if the law school did not exist. It puts a monetary amount on what these students are giving back to their communities as part of their legal education."

The actual number of law student pro bono hours is likely much larger than the 2.2 million reported by the AALS. Its figure is based on responses from only 80 of the 205 ABA-accredited schools, and represents just 45 percent of the law student population. The comprehensive number could be more than double what was reported. Some law schools said they don't currently track student pro bono hours, but will do so in the future, Greif said. The AALS plans to conduct the pro bono survey annually.

Performing pro bono even before officially launching their legal careers can have a lasting impact on students' lifetime commitment to such work, several pro bono advocates said.

"It reinforces the ethical obligation that all lawyers have to provide pro bono legal services," said Eve Runyon, president and chief executive officer of the Pro Bono Institute. "It introduces students to that obligation at an early age. By starting at an early age, they're able to appreciate the importance of the work and they're able to experience the satisfaction that volunteers receive from engaging in that type of meaningful experience."

George "Buck" Lewis, a shareholder at Baker Donelson and the chairman of the ABA's Standing Committee on Pro Bono & Public Service, said he has seen those benefits firsthand with the students he teaches in a leadership course at the University of Tennessee College of Law.

"They're using their education to help people who might not otherwise be able to assert their legal rights," Lewis said. "It's a wonderful learning experience for them, and it gives them a taste of the joys pro bono can bring once they become lawyers."

According to the survey, 2016 law graduates on average performed 124 hours of pro bono service while on campus. That includes work performed as part of formal law school clinics and externships at nonprofit organizations, as well as purely volunteer legal work, Greif said. The AALS is not disclosing which law schools had the highest pro bono hour average, Greif said, but he noted that schools with pro bono requirements for graduation tended to have higher averages. The AALS did not collect data on how many schools currently have pro bono requirements.

The AALS used \$23.56 as the value for each law student pro bono hour when calculating the total value of services rendered. That figure was established as the standard value of volunteer work by Independent Sector, a coalition of nonprofit organizations.

"Access to justice regardless of means is a guiding principle of the legal profession and legal education," said Paul Marcus, a professor at the College of William & Mary Marshall-Wythe Law School and the 2017 AALS president. "We are pleased to report these significant contributions by law students toward equal justice for all."

Runyon said law schools have made pro bono service a greater priority in recent years. "I think there's an increased focus by law schools to engage students as early as possible, whether through a mandatory pro bono program, or voluntary program, or a clinical program."

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