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## OPINION

# FOCUS ON INCREASING SUPPLY

By Henry N. Adorno & Francisco G. Gonzalez

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DURING THE PAST few years, a number of well-intended efforts have been implemented in order to increase the diversity of corporate legal departments, as well as the law firms that serve them.

These efforts range from individual companies taking an aggressive stance on increased diversity in their own legal departments and in the legal providers who serve them to well-structured and forward-looking collective efforts such as Rick Palmore's Call to Action, which includes more than 500 large corporations, several of their traditional legal providers and key professional organizations.

There is no doubt that these efforts have been fruitful across the legal landscape. Increasingly, legal departments are more diverse and are paying increased attention to hiring, promoting and retaining diverse attorneys. Those same legal departments are placing increased demands on the law firms that handle their cases for similar commitments.

Efforts by corporate America and law firms have paid off—although there is yet more to be done. However, it is the success of these efforts without significant increase in the supply of minority attorneys that has created an imbalance. In short, we have come to face the harsh realities of one of the oldest economic paradigms: The demand is there, but there is simply not enough supply. How so? The percentages of minority attorneys in graduating classes are not growing or are simply growing at a pace that is well below that at which demand is growing.

According to figures published by the American Bar Association, J.D. degrees awarded to minority students have grown by a dismal 3.5% from the figures of 10 years ago. The slow pace of growth in graduation figures for diverse students appears to point to three main culprits: Law school may not be

Henry "Hank" N. Adorno is the founder and president of Adorno & Yoss, the largest certified minority-owned law firm in the country. He can be reached at [hna@adorno.com](mailto:hna@adorno.com). Francisco J. Gonzalez is director of the international services group at the firm. He can be reached at [fjg@adorno.com](mailto:fjg@adorno.com).



PETER BONO

perceived as a valid alternative for college graduates; admission requirements and financial demands may inhibit applicants; and attrition continues. Identifying the reasons why the supply of qualified diverse attorneys has not grown at a pace to match demand is a good step. There is no doubt that a lot more can be done.

What is needed—in addition to purely increasing the numbers of diverse attorneys—is a single platform, i.e., a national plan. A tax-exempt umbrella organization composed of corporate clients and the law firms that serve them, providing leadership and advocacy, would aim at undertaking the four key activities needed to create additional supply of qualified diverse attorneys:

■ **Outreach.** Designing and implementing programs for high school and college students that teach the benefits of law school and the practice of law as a career for minority students.

■ **Financial assistance.** Implementing financial assistance and scholarship programs for students to pursue law school and for those in law school to stay there.

■ **Mentoring and clerkship programs.** Nothing is better than an effective mentor to keep students interested in law school and to ensure success. Additionally, the actual experience of working at law firms or corporate legal departments can play a pivotal role in keeping students interested and lowering attrition rates.

■ **Placement programs.** Programs that ensure these students find rewarding employment opportunities after school.

### A potentially powerful program

This umbrella organization would qualify as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Participating corporate legal departments would encourage their major legal providers to donate a small percentage of the fees they receive from these clients on a yearly basis. As little as 1% of these fees would go a long way toward funding the initiatives outlined above.

The results—the sheer power of this “Corporate Legal Spend” program—are mind-numbing. Assume that 10 corporations with an average yearly legal services budget of \$50 million each join this group. Now, assume that participating law firms agree to a contribution equal to 1% of their total yearly fees from those corporations. Those contributions alone—without including any additional contributions from those corporations or difference entities—would amount to approximately \$5 million.

If we assume that 70% of the organization's total budget is devoted to scholarships, it would be able to provide an average of 230 full law school scholarships per year, or to roughly 3% of the total number of minority applicants in 2007.

Corporate America and a few truly committed law firms are largely doing their part to increase the demand for diverse attorneys by creating opportunities. The time has come, however, to develop ways to encourage diverse students to see the law as a viable avenue toward a decent, rewarding and well-respected life. The only way this can be achieved is through a single, umbrella organization that is funded by all involved with sufficient capital to hire professional managers and to truly make a dent in tackling this supply issue from the ground up. **NLJ**

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