

Faculty Notes

Why I Initiated the Public Defender Mentor Project For Law Students

by Professor Tamar Birkhead

As I began my 1L year at Harvard Law School (HLS) in 1989, I found myself in a particularly challenging environment. At the time, the students and faculty at HLS provided little support for public interest or poverty law. Further, my post-college background in magazine journalism and in casework investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect in New York City did not provide any additional guidance. The lack of institutional support coupled with my circuitous route to legal training made the steps I needed to take to achieve my goal of practicing law in the public sector unclear.

An announcement that a new program for 1Ls, the Legal Services Mentor Group, was being organized by faculty provided a beacon of light. Founded by the legendary professor and clinical education pioneer Gary Bellow, the group focused on encouraging and providing faculty support to first-year students interested in legal services for the poor. Out of a 1L class of 550, only seven or eight of us attended the first meeting. Despite the low interest, we continued to meet with Gary and other faculty throughout law school. We shared our values, our aspirations and our concerns. We exchanged personal stories and provided each other – teacher to student as well as student to student – with support, encouragement, and practical advice. After graduation, I clerked for a Massachusetts Appeals Court judge and then practiced in the Boston area as a public defender, working for six years on the state level and four years as a federal defender – with the experiences of the mentor group never far from my mind.

When I started teaching in the UNC School of Law's Criminal Clinic in 2004, I found myself speaking with some frequency to students interested in indigent defense. They sought advice on class selection, summer internships suggestions, effective resume and cover letter drafting, and how to interview and network to get their "dream public defender job." While the School of Law provided some resources for these students, I was concerned that the lines of communication between the appropriate faculty and other students sharing the same interests and goals were not always open during their 1L and 2L years. Inspired by my own experiences nearly 20 years earlier, I decided to form a group that would help identify and provide support to these Carolina students.

The Public Defender Mentor Project [PDMP] got off the ground this academic year. With the strong support of Dean Boger, Assistant Dean Sarah Wald, and others, including Dean Sylvia Novinsky, Professor Rich Rosen, and Professor Deborah Weissman, we scheduled three formal meetings for each semester, with each meeting focusing on a different aspect of preparing students for public defender work. With the assistance of 3L Sonya Pfeiffer, we organized a panel in October at which nine PDs from across North Carolina spoke about their experiences and shared what inspired them and kept them committed to the work. In February, we hosted another panel – this one with Carolina alums working as PDs outside of North Carolina, including representatives from Public Defender Services in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia Defenders, and the PD's office in Chesapeake, Virginia. An informal luncheon followed each of these popular panels allowing students to meet, speak and network with our guests.

UNC faculty members participating in the PDMP have an open door policy for students in the Project; they meet, counsel, and assist them in pursuing PD positions – both for the summer and post-graduation. In addition to Professor Rosen, other participating faculty members include Professor Bobbi Boyd, Visiting Clinical Assistant Professor Caitlin Fenhagen, and Professor Joe Kennedy.

In terms of future goals for the PDMP, the group intends to address one of the main hurdles for law students who are committed to indigent defense – financial need. While some public interest funding is available for students to work as summer interns in PD offices, the resources have never been able to meet the need. We have initiated a campaign to increase the number of summer and post-graduate grants available to Carolina students to pursue this vitally important work, and we welcome your ideas and support during the process. Please visit our webpage on the School of Law website or contact me directly to get involved with the PDMP. We rely on Carolina alumni – both those who are or have been PDs as well as those who support the work of public defenders – to make this project work! ☺

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UNC School of Law Response to the UNC Public Defender Mentor Project

I am a 42 year-old second-year law student training for a second career. My first career was as a professor in the Department of Religion at Duke University. I left academia and entered law school because I wanted to pursue direct advocacy work for indigent clients, but until this fall I wasn't sure whether I would pursue criminal or civil work. The neat convergence of two criminal procedure classes on my fall schedule and the monthly noon-hour programs sponsored by the PDMP sealed my career choice. The PDMP programs not only made me aware of the range of indigent criminal defense work that could be done, they also dispelled my concern that such work might not be a good fit for a 40-something mother of three. The vision for my future that I have today is a direct product of the PDMP.

–Kate Joyce

As a 1L, PDMP has helped me to not only set career goals but also to take steps in achieving those goals. Through our meetings and panel discussions, I have had the opportunity to meet current public defenders and learn from their experiences in the field. At the panel discussion in October, every speaker spoke with intense passion for their work and also of the great environment and sense of community in their offices. It was at this moment that I could see really envision myself doing public defender work.

PDMP has also helped me connect with other students that share my same interest in public defender work. In a world often centered on firms, it is great to know that there are others with the same goals and passions as yourself.

–Allison Standard

The PDMP is a great resource for learning about public defense – a field of practice that we students don't hear much about.

–Luke Everett