Top 10 Best Practices For Integrating Law Firm Fellows

Over the past couple of years, many law firm pro bono counsel/administrators have been tasked with finding placements in the public interest community for large groups of incoming associates. Pro bono counsel and members of the public interest community have discussed at length these deferral/fellowship programs as they have impacted all parties involved. One issue that was raised many times throughout the course of several panel discussions on this topic is the (re)integration of these associates at the firms.

While there will certainly be challenges to address, the return of these associates has the capacity to present the legal community with an unprecedented opportunity for pro bono collaboration, as attorneys trained in a wide variety of public interest practice areas bring that knowledge back to their firms. Now more than ever, legal service providers in the public interest community could use the support of private law firms. To that end, if the feedback from the associates and host group suggests that the experience was positive, we should all strive towards the goals of increasing pro bono participation generally and cultivating long-term relationships.

The New York City Bar Association's Pro Bono and Legal Services Committee tasked a Subcommittee on Deferred Associates and Law Firm Public Interest Fellows with providing our community useful guidance on reintegration of these associates into law firms. The subcommittee has canvassed both the law firm pro bono counsel/administrations and the public interest community for their expertise and insights. We are now pleased to present the following Top 10 "Best Practices" guide.

For questions or suggestions about this effort, please contact Jennifer Friedman (jfriedman@law.pace.edu), Edwina Martin (emartin@ls-nyc.org) or Scot Fishman (sfishman@dl.com).

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1 Debriefing Fellows

It will be extremely important for both the public interest host group and the firm to debrief the fellows separately when their placements end (either in writing or through meetings).

An exit interview at the host group is suggested: 1) to speak generally about their fellowship experience (perhaps as would be done in any exit interview) and to provide constructive feedback for future fellowship programs at the host organization; 2) to identify the skills that the fellows learned and/or developed while at the placement; and 3) to determine how interested the fellow is in future work in this area of pro bono practice, and if applicable, with the host group specifically. This last goal will set the stage for conversations at the firm.

An interview at the firm is suggested with each fellow (or perhaps in small groups): 1) to engage in a discussion generally about the fellow's interest in participating in the firm's pro bono program; 2) to discuss the appropriate balance of pro bono and billable work; 3) to identify the type of pro bono work that the fellow would like to do (do not assume that the fellow will want to remain involved with the host group or that he/she will want to do the same type of pro bono work upon arriving at the firm); and 4) to set an individual plan for each fellow to leverage the skills he/she developed while away from the firm, as it impacts their own career development, the firm and the host group.

2 Creating Ambassadors

One way to leverage the fellows' pro bono experience while providing a platform for them in the firm is for them to become "ambassadors" between the firm and their host group. After debriefing the fellow (at the host group and firm), and assuming the fellow has indicated an interest in helping the firm's pro bono efforts in such a capacity, the next step would be to schedule a conversation between the pro bono administrator, host group and fellow to discuss further the possibility of establishing (or perhaps continuing) a long-term relationship/project.

It is very important, however, not to construct an effort that loads too much responsibility on the fellows, as they are just beginning their careers at the firm. For that reason, we do not envision that the fellows will be the point of contact at the firm for all purposes related to the host group – that should remain the responsibility of the pro bono administrator. By pairing the fellow with a supervising partner and more senior associate, you can develop a team around this newly created ambassador, who has gained substantive knowledge of an area of public interest law.

The fellow can take on several different roles. One possibility is to simply become an "enabler" – allowing more attorneys in the firm to accept cases within a specific area of expertise. To be clear, the ambassadors need not do heavy lifting on all of these new cases. Instead, other attorneys can use the ambassadors as the "in-house expert" or "sounding board" from time to time, or they can be teamed up with attorneys who have less experience. Another role for the fellow is to assist the firm's pro bono administrator with reviewing new matters from the host group (e.g., identifying the level of difficulty), and he/she can also provide more information about the group's inner workings. Taking this one step further, at the appropriate time, the fellow can assume responsibility for helping to establish a new signature project at the firm with the host group. Lastly, the ambassadors can take on the role of an internal "cheerleader" – someone who can drum up support for a particular area of pro bono practice and for pro bono generally.

3 Keeping Cases

There are other ways, short of establishing the fellow as an ambassador, to keep the momentum going once fellows return. You may want to encourage some of the fellows to bring matters back to the firm with them from the fellowship. Of course, pro bono administrators will have to determine whether each of these matters qualifies for the firm's pro bono assistance, and the matters will have to be properly staffed and supervised. That said, this would be a quick and fairly easy way to make the transition to the firm as seamless as possible.

4 Distributing Directories

We suggest distributing a directory of all fellows upon their arrival at the firm. To be clear, this directory should be different from the typical document used to introduce new associates to the firm. Instead, it should include detailed information about the type of skills he/she developed, as well as any noteworthy accomplishments. See the attached example.

5 Hosting Events

Perhaps not an original idea, it's worth mentioning that a social event is always in order when new attorneys arrive at the firm! A social gathering for fellows could help you build momentum around their return to the firm and will help them build visibility. You may also consider scheduling regular events for just the fellows, so that as their roles evolve they can bounce ideas off of each other and share experience.

6 Scheduling Presentations

Identify ways for the fellows to present their fellowship accomplishments to various groups at the firm. Examples of appropriate group settings include practice group and regional office meetings.

7 Planning Trainings

Typically, pro bono administrators schedule trainings when new attorneys begin working at the firm to introduce them to various areas of pro bono practice. One twist to this usual process is to invite some of the host groups to deliver the trainings so that the fellows can help out. This will allow the fellows to demonstrate their substantive skills while giving them a platform for public speaking at the firm. The host groups may consider using the fellows for trainings that are held outside the fellow's firm.

8 Dedicating Website/Intranet Space

We suggest dedicating a section of the firm's pro bono website and/or intranet to the fellowship program. This would be a great place to store information about the fellows and their experiences, to highlight their recent accomplishments, and to direct them to internal and external resources they might need.

9 Keeping in Touch

The public interest host groups should consider inviting the fellow back to the organization from time to time for a lunch or to attend trainings, lectures and/or non-confidential meetings with the staff attorneys. Alternatively, pro bono administrators may wish to invite fellows to join collaborative meetings between the firm and the host group. Doing this may keep the momentum going as well as the relationship between the fellow and the host group.

10 Recognizing Accomplishments

The public interest host organization should consider fellows as recipients of the group's various recognitions. While fellows are probably not looking for this type of recognition, including them may be one way to show appreciation for their efforts and could go a long way in keeping the relationship going. It may also be a good way for pro bono administrators to demonstrate that the firm's decision to support such fellowship programs has made an impact in the public interest community.

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