New Developments in Legal Education: The “Law School Firm” at Pace University
By Anting J. Wang

Several law schools have responded to today’s constricted job market by seizing upon a new model of legal education informally known as the “Law School Firm.”¹ A law school firm is essentially a firm associated with a law school which provides recent graduates a space to develop lawyering skills while also providing legal services to clients. The experience is akin to a medical residency, with the aim of providing a transitional training period to resident attorneys while also generating profits and ultimately achieving firm economic self-sufficiency. In essence, a law school firm is a “professionally-managed, revenue-generating, non-profit law firm” established by a law school.²

Pace University’s Community Law Practice (PCLP) in White Plains, New York, promises to be a groundbreaking pilot effort in this new framework, providing recent graduates an avenue to develop skills suited for solo practice or small-firm litigation, while also addressing the needs of the surrounding low-income community.

1. Background

A confluence of events set the stage for PCLP’s establishment. First, Westchester County had a significant unmet need for pro bono and low-bono legal services, particularly in the areas of immigration and related advocacy issues. Pace sought to remedy this by establishing the PCLP, whose initial focus will be immigration law. Immigration was particularly appropriate for first-year development because the U.S. Department of Justice’s Board of Immigration Appeals (Board) provides recognition to nonprofit organizations and accreditation of non-attorneys who can then assist clients in immigration proceedings before the Executive Office for Immigration Review’s immigration courts and the Board, or before the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), or both, thus bypassing the need for formal bar admission. Further, although Pace already sponsors an Immigration Justice Clinic for enrolled students, significant extension of services was appropriate as legal demand had not yet been met, and to build upon Pace’s significant expertise in this substantive area.

Second, as employment opportunities for recent graduates declined amidst a faltering economy, the law school saw PCLP as an opportunity to cushion these young attorneys’ entry into the workforce by providing them a one-year “residency” (akin to a medical residency) through which they could further develop their skills and hone legal knowledge.

Last, in recent years clients have exhibited an increased unwillingness to pay exorbitant fees for first- and second-year lawyers, who often enter the profession with little experience and are essentially trained “on-the-job” on the client’s dime. Although PCLP resident attorneys are likely to enter public service or solo practice, residents are not barred from private practice once their tenure at Pace ends and may join a number of well-established firms. Under the residency framework, PCLP provides fellows hands-on experience as practicing attorneys, thereby moderating the transition while simultaneously addressing clients’ reluctance to fund legal training.

2. Brief Description of the PCLP

PCLP has four fellows in its inception year, overseen by Jennifer Friedman, Executive Director of the PCLP and Director of Pace’s Public Interest Law Center, and supervised by Karin Anderson Ponzor, Assistant Director. Fellows currently serve one-year terms, although extension to longer terms may be possible. Friedman noted that PCLP’s mission is not to duplicate a law firm environment. Rather, the organization’s goal is to build a community-based legal practice aligned with Pace’s commitment to social justice and public interest efforts, while simultaneously providing an environment by which recent graduates may refine and further develop legal practice skills. Although the PCLP opened with a focus on immigration law, Friedman noted that clients are already calling with a variety of legal problems, and expansion into family, housing or other high-need practice areas is under consideration.

PCLP is anticipated as a “low-bono” organization, in which clients will be charged fees based on a sliding scale in accordance with their ability to pay. Although currently seeded by the law school and private sponsors, the long-term goal of the PCLP is to have a hybrid business model in which client fees support much of the program, supplemented with traditional sources of nonprofit funding. Further, PCLP differs from a traditional incubator program, in which solo practitioners gather to share resources, ideas and expertise. Instead, PCLP fellows work under the Pace name, are employees of Pace Law School, and are generally non-admitted attorneys being primed for solo or small-firm practice in the public interest arena.