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## Sponsorship: A step beyond mentoring

Fortunately, there isn't much debate on the value of mentoring for new lawyers.

According to a National Association for Law Placement (NALP) 2013 study, "The State of Mentoring in the Legal Profession," nearly 90 percent of all law firms surveyed offered some form of mentoring. For firms of more than 250 attorneys, the percentage was even higher.

Whether mandatory or voluntary, within departments or across departments, these programs are seen as effective ways of integrating new lawyers into an organization by facilitating their professional development and inculcating the culture of the firm.

Of course, mentoring programs aren't limited to law firms. Highly successful programs are run by county and state bar associations, affinity bar associations (such as female bar associations or practice group bar associations), law schools, government agencies and corporate legal departments.

In Illinois, more than 3,500 attorneys have completed a form of the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism's mentoring program, currently offered through more than 75 different organizations.

Those being mentored tend to appreciate these programs, and that's no surprise. What's not to like? They get to learn at the elbow of a seasoned practitioner, ask questions they may feel embarrassed to ask other colleagues, and even potentially gain access to the mentor's professional network.

While a good mentoring relationship requires effort from both parties, the mentors are the true heroes. Giving of their time, energy and wisdom is time-consuming, but it has its own rewards.

We often hear from mentors in our programs around the state that seeing legal practice through the eyes of their proteges not only reminds them of how much they've learned that they take for granted but also of why they became lawyers in the first place.

Further, they enjoy the warm, fuzzy feeling that comes from passing down knowledge, customs and norms to the next generation of lawyers and taking an active personal interest in seeing a younger lawyer develop.

Mentoring is wonderful, but is it enough?

A significant issue facing the profession is the continuing under-representation of women and minorities in leadership roles. According to the December update of Catalyst's study "Women in the Law: Making the Case," women in 2013 constituted 47 percent of law school graduating classes, yet they represented only 33 percent of lawyers and 17 percent of equity partners.

In the same year, people of color constituted 25.8 percent of law school classes but less than 15 percent of lawyers and 5.4 percent of equity partners.

Women of color represented only 2.3 percent of partners in 2013.

Women and minorities also lag in judgeships, positions on influential committees at law firms, law school dean positions and general counsel positions at Fortune 500 companies.

NALP's most recent statistics, released in February, measured small increases among minorities and women in law firms nationwide between 2013 and 2014, but they noted that "the total change since 1993, the first year for which NALP has comparable aggregate information, has been only marginal."

Attrition studies by NALP, Catalyst and the National Association of Women Lawyers

### PROFESSIONALISM ON POINT



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tell still more — minorities and women leave their firms in greater numbers and for a variety of reasons, mostly that they experience exclusion, lack of constructive feedback and perceive a lack of commitment from firm leadership to promote diverse candidates.

Mentoring can help address these issues. Mentors who work for the same organization as their proteges can welcome younger lawyers into firm networks, introduce them to client contacts and help them understand the dynamics and politics of advancement at the organization.

If you are one of the many dedicated mentors engaged in these sorts of activities, you deserve kudos. But again, mentoring alone may not be enough to bring about meaningful change.

Noted legal mentoring expert Ida Abbott highlights the critical importance of sponsorship, describing it as "mentorship at the highest level." Abbott has noted the key differences between a mentor and a sponsor.

A mentor focuses on overall

professional development and often plays a direct role in transferring knowledge and skills. A sponsor, on the other hand, is a strong advocate who has power and influence and is willing to champion a colleague's career.

A sponsor has skin in the game: She or he will publicly endorse another's qualifications and take risks on that person's behalf, such as arguing in favor of a raise, key assignment or promotion.

For a sponsor to make this kind of investment and take this kind of risk, he or she needs to be able to trust that the sponsored colleague will perform at the highest level.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett, author of the book "Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor" (2013, Harvard Business School Publishing Corp.), has pointed out that this trust issue is where sponsorship can break down for women and minorities.

"When it comes to figuring out whom to sponsor, senior leaders — typically white men — most readily turn to the people they feel most comfortable with. Most often that means other white men," Hewlett writes.

While acknowledging that sponsorship relationships can't be forced, Hewlett reported that several companies, including Citigroup, Deloitte and Morgan Stanley, have created more structured and transparent paths to ensure that those sponsored include underrepresented groups.

Mentoring happens at many law firms and sponsorship at fewer. Leaders of the strongest firms will make sure that they are identifying and developing their strongest resources. If you are not currently mentoring a younger colleague, please consider sharing your gifts. If you are already a mentor, consider stepping up to a sponsorship.