

Skadden, Arps To Steer Poor, Minorities To Law

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Responding to what is being called a “crying need” for greater diversity in the legal profession, a top Manhattan law firm and the City College of New York are launching a program aimed at steering poor and minority students to top law schools.

Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom announced yesterday it is committing \$9.6 million to the program, which will zero in on 100 City College juniors and seniors from poor and minority backgrounds, offering them scholarships, academic help, and summer jobs — all to aid their pursuit of admission to top law schools.

In a sign of the program’s possibilities, deans from seven top law schools are already indicating an interest; the new program’s advisory board includes the law school deans at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Stanford, Howard, and the University of Pennsylvania.

“This is a unique moment in law schools,” the president of City College, Gregory Williams, said. “This is something that I’ve been hoping for for the last 10 years.”

A senior partner at the firm, Joseph Flom, who himself attended City College, said Skadden, Arps was reaching out to address “a crying need.”

“You compare the representation of minorities in the legal profession, compared to doctors or engineers, the legal profession is far behind,” he said.

According to U.S. Census reports, just 11% of lawyers are racial minorities, compared to 25% of physicians and surgeons, 21% of accountants and auditors, and 18% of college and university teachers.

The City College program, to be called the Skadden, Arps Honors Program, aims to crack that disparity.

Mr. Williams, the president of City College, said he hopes it will have the same effect as a program at City College that works to place disadvantaged students in medical professions. That school, the Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education, now has a racial mix of just less than a third Asian, a third black, 20% Hispanic, and about 15% white, Mr. Williams said.

The dean of Columbia’s law

school, David Schizer, said in an interview yesterday that he plans to “take a careful look” at the program’s graduates.

The dean of New York University’s law school, Richard Revesz, who is also on the program’s advisory board, said the legal profession would be stronger if it was more diverse. “It would be good for the lawyers to mirror the diversity of their clients,” he said.

The president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, John Payton, said adding diversity would strengthen American democracy. “There are probably no centers of power in this country that don’t have either lawyers in them or lawyers that helped design them,” he said. “Programs and efforts that seek to address the lack of diversity inside this most powerful profession I think are really important things that, at the end of the day, will help us become a better democracy.”

Mr. Williams, who served as president of the Association of American Law Schools in 1999, said lawyers who come from disadvantaged backgrounds are better able to serve clients who are disadvantaged.

His resume suggests he is well-equipped to oversee such a program. As an associate dean at the University of Iowa’s law school, Mr. Williams said he oversaw a growth in the number of minority groups enrolling to 25% from 2% over the course of about 13 years. Then, as dean of Ohio State’s law school, he made a second push.

A highlight came in 1999, when he was one of several lawyers to visit the White House for a meeting with President Clinton deemed a “presidential call to action” for the legal profession to diversify.

“Ever since I left the White House, I have been hoping that there would be some large law firms in the country that would undertake this type of program on a massive scale,” Mr. Williams said. “Today, we have it.”

Mr. Flom at Skadden, Arps said he hopes the program leads to a larger movement of law firms and colleges pushing for diversity. “Hopefully it will be a demonstration of what can work, and if it does work, I’m very certain that it will be replicated,” he said.