

The Power of Two: Law School and Bar Collaborations

By Amy Timmer

I can't even remember the first time that I met Thomas M. Cooley Law School Associate Dean of Students and Professionalism Amy Timmer, but I know it was at least 11 years ago when I was still very wet behind the ears regarding my work with the State Bar Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program (LJAP). I had been advised that one of my primary responsibilities would be performing student outreach activities and collaborating with law school leaders on programming for students. As an LJAP newbie with limited prior exposure to the culture of the legal profession, I was, to say the least, intimidated at the notion of lunching with someone who I imagined would be a stuffy, pretentious, overly intellectual, rigid law school matriarch (I admit my faulty bias here, but I was so naive!). Imagine my surprise and relief when, instead, I met a youthful, exuberant, enthusiastic, emotionally sensitive, passionate woman who was warm and gracious embodied in Dean Timmer. She even had a great sense of humor!

Over the years, Amy Timmer has been a great champion of LJAP. She has frequently referred students to us and consistently sung our praises. We have coordinated numerous projects for Cooley students and, in the process, Dean Timmer has become a respected and valued colleague and friend. She continues to be an ardent supporter of student wellness and advocates tirelessly with other like-minded individuals for a paradigm shift in the legal culture. The new paradigm that we collectively seek encourages an atmosphere of safety in the culture. This atmosphere of safety allows an expanding cultural attitude of permission for attorneys and students to become self-aware, identify vulnerabilities, and seek help when needed. LJAP is interested in supporting wellness for lawyers, judges, and students statewide and

welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with other law school leaders in this quest.

—Martha D. Burkett,
Program Administrator, LJAP

Some of the very best experiences we offer to law students at Thomas M. Cooley Law School come from collaborations with bar associations. In its January 1999 report entitled “A National Action Plan on Lawyer Conduct and Professionalism,” the Conference of Chief Justices urged collaboration between law schools and bar associations and recognized professionalism—including wellness and mentoring—as the appropriate basis for such collaboration and a necessary element of professionalism. The black letter recommendations contained in the report include the following:

A. Professionalism, Leadership, and Coordination

The appellate court of highest jurisdiction in each state should take a leadership role in evaluating the contemporary needs of the legal community with respect to lawyer professionalism and coordinating the activities of the bench, the bar, and the law schools in meeting those needs. Specific efforts should include:

- Ensuring that judicial and legal education makes reference to broader social issues and their impact on professionalism and legal ethics;
- Increasing the dialogue among law schools, the courts and the practicing bar through periodic meetings; and
- Correlating the needs of the legal profession—bench, bar, and law schools—to identify issues, assess

trends, and set a coherent and coordinated direction for the profession.

B. Improving Lawyer Competence

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4. Assistance to lawyers with mental health or substance abuse problems.

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6. Mentoring

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C. Law School Education and Bar Admission

1. Law School Curriculum

In preparing law students for legal practice, law schools should provide students with the fundamental principles of professionalism and basic skills for legal practice.¹

When the Conference of Chief Justices adopted the national action plan back in 2001, Cooley Law School took those directives to heart and reached out to the State Bar of Michigan to join Cooley's Professionalism Committee. With help from John Berry, the State Bar's then executive director, the committee went on to recommend a Professionalism Plan for Cooley Law School, subsequently endorsed by the Cooley community (students, faculty, staff, alumni, and board of directors) and supported by the State Bar. In a letter of support, Berry and then SBM President Reginald Turner offered these prescient words about the ambitious Professionalism Plan for Cooley Law School:

Nothing of this magnitude would have a hope of succeeding were it not for the joint effort of the School and the Bar. Successful implementation of this Plan is virtually assured given the Bar's commitment to remain involved with the School in carrying the vision forward.²

The rest is history. The plan has been fully implemented. In the area of professionalism, Cooley has partnered with the State Bar on:

- Character and fitness in our new-student orientations and in our personal and professional responsibility classes
- Mentoring law students and a study of that mentoring project undertaken by Oakland University and supported by a grant from the Michigan State Bar Foundation
- The first and all subsequent professionalism orientations for law students
- Hosting Attorney Discipline Board panel hearings at Cooley and meetings of the Attorney Grievance Commission
- Supporting the Richard Steinberg Memorial Treatment Fund and the services provided by the State Bar Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program through proceeds from our Grand Rapids campus's Barrister's Ball
- Holding some sessions of the State Bar Annual Meeting at Cooley
- A wellness initiative

We also partner with county and special-purpose bar associations on mentoring, pro bono, and professionalism opportunities, and find that these partnerships result in rich experiences for our students.

I am especially proud of Diana Miers, former Student Bar Association president at Cooley's Grand Rapids campus (now working as a law clerk at the Kent County Prosecutor's Office Family Division), who chose the Richard Steinberg Memorial Treatment Fund as the beneficiary of the Grand Rapids campus's Barrister's Ball. Diana researched a number of possible recipients and found that the treatment fund's focus on attorney wellness was exactly the right program for law students to support. As she wrote in her article that appeared in the September 2010 issue of the *Michigan Bar Journal*:

The need for healthy coping mechanisms and balance is something each of us can relate to, and support of the LJAP and the

Richard Steinberg Memorial Treatment Fund gives us the ability to help those in our profession find ways to balance the burden of the legal profession with everyday life challenges. Further, it enables individuals to continue or return to the practice of law and advocate for truth and justice. There seemed no other cause that could possibly impact the students, legal community, and general community in any better way.³

The chief justices were right. Collaborations between law schools and bar associations are appropriate, necessary, and powerful. They result in more engaged law students who begin to understand the importance of bar association membership and services while still in school, and they result in better prepared attorneys. My hope is that all Michigan law schools will lend their support to the Richard Steinberg Memorial Treatment Fund. ■



Amy Timmer is the associate dean of students and professionalism at Thomas M. Cooley Law School. She has been a full-time faculty member since 1992 when she left the practice of law at Honigman Miller Schwartz & Cohn. She attended Cooley Law School in the evenings while employed by the Michigan Department of Commerce as assistant director and as business ombudsman to then Governor James J. Blanchard, and graduated summa cum laude.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Implementation Plan for the Conference of Chief Justices: A National Action Plan on Lawyer Conduct and Professionalism*, adopted August 2, 2001 by the Conference of Chief Justices (American Bar Association, 2002), at Appendix C: National Action Plan, black letter recommendations, pp 25-27, available at <http://www.abanet.org/cpr/reports/impl_plan.pdf> (accessed September 4, 2010).
2. Thomas M. Cooley Law School, *Professionalism Plan for the Thomas M. Cooley Law School* (2002), at 2 <http://www.cooley.edu/overview/brochures/theplan_02.pdf> (accessed September 4, 2010).
3. Miers, *Creative giving: Law students supporting wellness in the legal profession*, 89 Mich B J 60 (September 2010).