Despite the coronavirus pandemic, the graduating class of 2020 had a solid year for its pro bono efforts. The 125 students in the graduating class who volunteered for 50 or more pro bono hours, amassed a total of more than 41,000 hours, or an average of about 320 hours per student. Unlike a number of other schools, those hours include only those for which the student receives neither academic credit nor any form of pay. To put that average in perspective, New York requires only 50 hours of pro bono work for admission, and it counts hours for which the student receives academic credit or are paid for work at non-profits. This year’s totals were lower than the previous few years, but still the fifth largest ever. And it is more than six times the 6,380.5 hours recorded by the 64 members of the class of 2011 when the pro bono program began in earnest. We hope to continue to record pro bono hours in this range for the future, as we try to bring on more opportunities for more students. Thanks to the herculean efforts of Assistant Dean David Johnson and the IT staff, we held our pro bono recognition ceremony online with every student given a chance to say a few words about their experiences – and with friends and family able to watch from wherever they were.

As in the past, my work as associate dean can be roughly divided into three parts: (1) special programs; (2) assisting students locate public interest and public service jobs and working to make it financially possible to take those positions; and (3) providing meaningful opportunities for students to do pro bono work and supporting students who wish to do it. On the job side, Siobahn
Madison and Matt Orlins did most of the day to day work; on the pro bono front, David Johnson is responsible for much of what we do.

For those new to GW Law School (and for many who have been here for some time), there is often uncertainty about the relation between the Pro Bono, the Clinics, and the Field Placement Programs. Last year, at the urging of Laurie Kohn, who is the director of the clinics, we prepared a short summary explaining how the three parts fit together https://my.law.gwu.edu/Departments/Clinics/deptContentManagement/Manage%20Department%20Documents/RELATION%20AMONG%20CLINICS%20-%20Final.pdf.

Public Interest & Pro Bono Pre-Orientation and Other Special Programs

As it has done for the previous nine years, the 2019-20 public interest program began with 90 incoming students arriving three days early for a voluntary Public Interest & Pro Bono Pre-Orientation program that is unique to GW. All students had an opportunity to go to Superior Court – our local trial court – first to hear from judges and law clerks, and then to visit the various courtrooms where proceedings were taking place, including criminal, civil, landlord-tenant, family law, and small claims. They also met with administrative law judges to learn about the many different kinds of issues that are handled in the District in proceedings outside the regular court system. This year everyone was able to meet with representatives of the Council of the District of Columbia and with the Mayor’s counsel and her staff to learn about our bizarre system of government and our relations with Congress. Other opportunities were in Arlington County with the Chief Public Defender and the Commonwealth’s Attorney and at its detention facility; the Human Rights Campaign; the Takoma Wellness Center medical marijuana dispensary; the Veterans Consortium; and the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless.
On the third morning we had community service work cleaning up the grounds at the National Park Service HQ at Haines Point. On the third afternoon, the Washington Council for Lawyers hosted a poverty simulation program designed to give students insights into the special problems encountered by lawyers serving low income individuals. The three days also provided for a bonding experience for students with similar interests, as well as the chance to meet faculty and administrators on an informal basis and interact with upper-class students who led the groups. Here is a partial group photo at the end of community service.

![Partial group photo at the end of community service.](image)

The public interest program has two other special programs during the year that give the students unique learning and service opportunities. The first is called the Gulf Recovery Program, which was started in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, but has now morphed into a
week-long effort in which 24 students were exposed to the special problems of obtaining access to justice in New Orleans. As part of the experience, the students this year assisted various legal service organizations. The other highlight of this program for many is the opportunity to meet with Federal District Judge Mary Ann Lemmon, who always invites a guest who is involved in an important aspect of the justice system in New Orleans. This year she brought in a curator at the Free People of Color Museum to talk about the history of slavery and freedom in New Orleans.

The other major public interest event outside of Washington is the immigration related alternative spring break, in which a dozen or so students have gone to either Tucson, Arizona or El Paso, Texas (this year), where this year eight students explored the related problems of border control and immigrants seeking legitimate entry into this country. Activities included educational presentations from members of the El Paso immigrant community, activists, and government officials, a trip into Juarez to better understand non-American perspectives of border issues, a day at federal and immigration court to observe proceedings and speak with attorneys and judges, volunteering opportunities to cook meals for refugees, and a visit to shelters to speak directly with individuals released from ICE custody. The photo below was taken of the group at a visit to a library in Juarez:
There was no Alternative Spring Break here in Washington this year for two reasons. First, GW’s Spring Break was earlier than other local law schools so that we could not partner on projects, which is key to this program’s success. More significantly, that was when COVID was hitting and providers shut down even for the other law schools with later, overlapping breaks. As such, no local law school was able to offer an Alternative Spring Break. Sadly, it was just another victim of the pandemic.

Jobs

It is no secret that there are fewer law jobs now as compared to ten years ago, but public interest jobs do not seem to have been hit as hard as other areas, perhaps because they were not plentiful to start. Government jobs were holding steady until the Trump hiring freeze, which has
now eased somewhat. In the end, almost 20% of our most recent graduating class had federal, state, or local government, or non-profit jobs, not including judicial clerkships. Moreover, our students are in a better position than many, not only because being in Washington makes it easier to learn about openings and move quickly, but also because over three hundred of our students participate annually in externships through the Field Placement Program, in which they gain real world experience, for academic credit, in government and non-profit jobs. 

https://www.law.gwu.edu/field-placement. What is even more significant is that, doing a good job at a Field Placement is the best way to land a permanent position there, or at some other place else where a satisfied supervisor is happy to recommend a student. Starting in mid-March, all our placements were remote, including this summer, but GW seemed to have fewer cancelations than many other schools.

There are three other aspects to the jobs function: (a) informing students about public interest or public service jobs, and why they are worth pursuing; (b) making specific information about specific jobs readily available; and (c) assisting in financing those opportunities and advising students about federal laws that make accepting such positions after graduation much more financially feasible.

Much of the information dissemination work is done by the Career Center, by David and Rasheen Robinson who have expanded the annual Pro Bono Fair, and by sponsoring other activities during National Pro Bono Week. I once again addressed each of the six Inns of Court in a special session on alternative jobs and why students should explore them. We have also arranged to bring in speakers to broaden student horizons on the world of public interest law and assist students seeking post-graduate public interest fellowships.
For the past ten years I have chosen five incoming students who receive the designation Public Interest Scholar, which mainly means that I am their faculty mentor and provide them additional guidance regarding their public interest careers, plus a Supreme Court trip to hear oral arguments without having to stand in line. The five students also receive $4000 for a summer public interest job after their first year.

On the financing side, the federal loan repayment and loan forgiveness programs are a major help to students who wish to take lower paying jobs, with governments, non-profits, or even law firms that serve middle income clients. The basics are described at: https://gwlawdean.wordpress.com/2010/10/13/making-public-interest-affordable/. Over the years there have been various efforts to reduce or eliminate the program, and the Trump budget contains some serious threats to the program on which we and others will keep an eye. The Department of Education is charged with running the loan forgiveness program, but it has done so in what could charitably called an unenthusiastic manner - and not just under the current administration. There are several lawsuits against DOE, in which I have provided some assistance.

The Law School also has a modest Loan Assistance Repayment Program, which is designed to help students who take low paying law-related positions in government service or at public interest organizations with the repayment of their law school debts. In 2019, led by Philip Hawkins, who is the Law School’s director of financial aid, we undertook a full review of the program and made significant changes, which have made it more transparent, provided objective criteria for granting assistance, and reduced the amount of discretion to assure that like graduates are treated the same. The temporary halt in repayments of student loans enacted by Congress has complicated our program, but we will continue to help those who have made payments, even if they could have deferred doing so. Here is how it operates
Now all we need is more funding.

Since I arrived at GW, my long-term goal has been to provide funding so that every student would be guaranteed $4000 for a summer job in a non-profit organization or a government agency. We have a very modest program now that, together with the funding from the student run Equal Justice Foundation, provides for stipends or tuition remissions for about 80 students a year. I continue to work with Development to bring in additional sponsors for summer grants and we have added almost ten in recent years.

Several years ago, I located a fund that was originally about $1.2 million, which is available for loans to GW law students. The will establishing the fund limits the amount that can be loaned to the accumulated income (now around $300,000), and we have used some of that to make loans to students who do not have paying summer jobs and who cannot take out federal loans unless they are taking courses (for which they would have to pay tuition). Practical considerations and limitations on making longer term loans to students have limited the use of these funds. This year we began to explore with the University whether there is flexibility in the will to allow us (and the Medical School which had a similar bequest from the same donor) to put the money to better use.

Pro Bono

In a city in which there are so many individuals in need of legal services, it should not be difficult to find ways for law students to bridge some of that gap. But it is not easy. Most existing organizations are not set up to take in volunteers for a variety of reasons, some understandable – no space and lack of a specific commitment of significant time – and others less so (it means changing the way things have always been done). Then there is the concern, largely over-stated, that law students might be providing assistance in a way that could be construed as giving legal
advice. As a result, while some of our students volunteer at existing organizations (mainly doing intake work), we have built our pro bono program on new ideas and new approaches, as the projects discussed below illustrate.

There are three other ingredients, at least two of which are essential for every successful pro bono project: a committed partner organization, enthusiastic students, and well-thought out logistics. The best ideas for projects will go nowhere unless there are willing partners and students who want to carry the ball and bring along others who are not ready for leadership roles. In some cases, such as our original domestic violence assistance project, the idea came from a student, and our role was to make it happen by opening doors and solving problems, which we did until some local court officials thought we were doing too much, even though there were never complaints about the quality of what our students did. In others, such as the cancer project, the idea came from outside the law school, but its use fell rapidly when the person who brought us the idea, left for another job, and no one stepped up to push the idea. No matter what the source, the idea can bear fruit only if there are individuals who want to see that the project actually gets done and who can help solve any logistics problems. And on the logistics side, the surest way to kill a project is to have either students or the individuals they are hoping to serve sit around without the other essential component.

Perhaps our most successful and innovative project involves the Mid-Atlantic Innocence Project (MAIP), which is a separate organization that has been here at GW for 10 years under a unique arrangement that we have tried, but unable to replicate with other groups. Under the first part, our students have been volunteering to assist MAIP in screening cases in which a convicted inmate seeks to establish his innocence, in order to decide whether MAIP should investigate it further. That part of our work continues with three rounds of case screenings annually (only two
in 2020 because of Covid) under the supervision of two volunteer attorneys, Jay Hulme of Arent Fox, and Peter Kolker of Zuckerman, Spaeder. After students prepare their memos, we meet as a group (I can’t resist being part of the discussion) to recommend which cases MAIP should accept. This year we had 69 student-screeners (some of whom volunteered more than once).

In addition, nine years ago, we created a special partnership under which GW provided office space and some equipment, and in first five years, a modest payment, in exchange for which MAIP agreed to bring in up to ten students each semester and in the summer as part of our outside placement program. Unfortunately, we no longer have space for MAIP, and they have moved to an office less than a mile away. But with Covid and the move, we are no longer certain of being able to continue the program as it was in the past, although we are hopeful that we can come close to replicating it. The novel aspect of this project was that it assured us of a large contingent of placements at one organization, with which we have a special working relationship. The students enroll under the field placement program, although in some ways their experience is similar to that in some clinics.

Here are descriptions of some of other projects that we have underway, most of which operated remotely since early March or stopped operating at all because of Covid19:

- This was the seventh year for our project in the Family Law Division of the Superior Court working in its Self-Help Center. The issues that come to the Center involve far more complicated questions than how to fill out the initial complaint. Most users of the Center are those without lawyers who are referred by the judge who is handling the case. The Center is staffed by experienced paralegals, supplemented by volunteer family law practitioners. Caroline Rogus, a lawyer with domestic relations experience who had been a fellow with our clinics, has completed her sixth year and will be with us again next year
to supervise our students. After a group training session, the students work in pairs on a regular schedule at the Self-Help Center where they provide information and other assistance to the unrepresented parties. Most of the students either are taking or have taken family law, and this provides them with a great opportunity to combine classroom and practical learning.

- For the past six years, our students have worked on a project at the federal bankruptcy court in Washington that helps individuals file their own bankruptcy petitions. Lawyers who are either bankruptcy practitioners or who receive training in the basics of individual bankruptcies serve as volunteers, and our students assist them, thereby increasing the number of individuals who can be helped. The lawyer who runs the program, GW Law alum Jeff Sherman, provides training for our students and then supervises them as they assist pro se filers. The program is open to students who either are taking or have taken one of the bankruptcy courses, and so, like the Self-Help program at the Family Law Division, our students learn practical skills, integrate them in the courses they are taking, and have something extra on their resumes when they seek a job.

- The Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless (WLCH) provides outreach at the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center (FRC) to families who have no safe place to sleep at night and who are seeking emergency shelter. Law students, working with volunteer lawyers, speak one-on-one with families, informing them of their legal right to shelter during hypothermic conditions and to appeal any denial of shelter.

- The D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center created a pro bono project to provide law students with the opportunity to play an important role at Landlord and Tenant Court. Law students staff
the Landlord Tenant Resource Center, work with customers to identify their legal issue(s), and relay relevant information to the attorney providing services to the customer.

- Every Friday at DC VA Medical Center, the Veterans Consortium, the Neighborhood Legal Services Program, and the DC VA Medical Center partner with law students and local corporate legal departments to staff The Veterans Pro Bono Legal Clinic. Volunteer attorneys and law students interview veterans and triage cases on a broad spectrum of issues.

- For several years, we had a successful program that provided assistance to U.S. students and staff at GW in the preparation of federal and local income taxes. Like several of our other pro bono programs, this one integrates classroom learning with real world problems, thereby increasing the value of the experience to both. After a year in which the student who had agreed to run the program, which meant recruiting students, training them, and doing all the scheduling, backed out in December, we joined forces with the GW Business School in 2019 and revived and grew the program. And to make matters even better, they have undertaken all the logistics and in exchange we provide space and equipment for training and eager student volunteers. However, this year we had problems with one of the co-sponsoring organizations which limited our ability to serve our intended audience. We are hoping to do better this year, but with Covid hanging over us, that is far from certain.

- Last fall we started a new program at the Superior Court Probate Division where our students (mainly those taking trusts & estates) assist DC residents who need help in working through the probate process for deceased family members. The impetus for this program came from the judges themselves, and their support, plus brand new facilities,
computers, and backup staff of lawyers and trained paralegals, made this a useful program for the many individuals who cannot afford a lawyer and need help navigating the process. As we move ahead, we may also move into the field of guardianship under which our students will help individuals who believe that a family member may need help in understanding what the system does and how to take the first steps in securing a guardian. In addition, two of the GW clinics are taking on some of the more complex probate and perhaps guardianship cases, which will be a natural progression for students who do pro bono work in the Probate Division.

- Finally, we are exploring ways to involve our alumni (mainly in small firms) in pro bono work, by making students available to assist them. Our successful efforts to persuade the Department of Labor to allow students to volunteer for pro bono work at for profit firms makes this possible, but the challenge remains to connect up the student, the lawyer, and the pro bono project.

**Conclusion**

The Public Interest & Pro Bono Program has made considerable strides in the past eleven years, but there is a long way to go in providing more opportunities for our students and in augmenting services to our community. We look forward to continuing to explore new ways to achieve our goals and to make George Washington known as the “public interest law school.”

Alan B. Morrison