

Bar helps undergrads think about law school

Program links students with mentors in field

BY ERIC YOUNG

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It's hard enough to get into law school, says Yolanda Jackson. But it can be even more daunting if you don't know anyone who has gone through it, graduated and started a career in law.

Jackson, diversity director at the San Francisco Bar Association, is readying a program aimed at Bay Area minority college undergraduates who are curious about pursuing a law career, but don't know where to start. The main thrust of the program will have local lawyers, judges and bar staff meeting with college students to help them better understand how to prepare for law school and what it takes to be a successful counselor.

Beginning in October, the San Francisco bar will host courses running until next spring in which lawyers and law school instructors will give tips on applying, discuss how to survive law school and offer an outlook on employment opportunities for lawyers.

"If you don't know anyone in your family who has been down that track, it's hard," said Jackson, herself a law school graduate. The Internet and reference books have lots of information, Jackson said. But college students can get overwhelmed and need some way to sift through the data. "We want to make (the process) more transparent," she said.

The bar association program will work with local colleges that have expressed interest in having students participate. Schools on board for the program, called *Destination: Law School*, include San Francisco State University, Dominican University of California, California State University East Bay, University of San Francisco, Golden Gate University and University of California, Davis.

The San Francisco Bar program opens amid a decline in the number of minority students applying for law school. The decline mirrors a broader drop in the number of students overall that are trying to study law. The number of blacks and Asians fell 14 percent and 13 percent respectively in the past five years. Overall, the number of students has declined 15.5 percent since 2003.

Jayne Salinger, who runs San Francisco Bar programs aimed at increasing minority participation, said the *Destination: Law School* effort will

be a success if it leads to mentoring relationships. "It's all about role models and guidance," said Salinger.

Some universities that are part of the bar association program have both undergraduate students and law students on campus. They have asked to be part of the bar association program to improve the link between the two. The University of San Francisco is an example.

"We have a very diverse student body, many of whom are first-generation" in college, said Keally McBride, an assistant professor in USF's politics department and pre-law adviser. "Many times they hope they can go to law school, but they don't have that resource to draw upon. They don't know lawyers, they have no idea about how to go about thinking about entering law school or how to choose an area in the law profession."

The bar association program can give students a better idea of what it takes to get through law school, McBride said. "One of the things people think is, 'I'll go to law school because I'll make a lot of money.' But they don't know what law school is about. Films and movies don't give that accurate view of what it means to become a lawyer."

Professionals involved in the *Destination: Law School* program won't get paid. But the program still has some costs for materials. Bay Area law firms will help underwrite those costs, the bar said. The bar program is also working with the Council on Legal Education Opportunity, a national nonprofit, to prepare its program.

As it embarks on the *Destination: Law School* program, the San Francisco Bar joins other professional groups aimed at boosting minority participation.

The *Aspiring Docs* program, for example, is aimed at minority college students interested in the medical field. Conducted on college campuses around the country, the program instructs students on how to get into medical school. The program is run by the Association of American Medical Colleges.

In the engineering profession, there is outreach as well. One long-running program is called the Junior Engineering Technical Society, aimed at high schoolers. "If you can get the kids when they are younger, you can encourage them to take advanced math and be ahead of the eight ball when they get into college," said Stacey Ober, a spokeswoman with the National Society of Professional Engineers.

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Diversity director,
San Francisco Bar
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The San Francisco Bar Association wants to encourage minority students to consider law school, say Jackson (left) and Salinger. "It's all about role models," says Salinger.