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Raising the bar: UGA Law School's student-driven initiatives promote diversity

Sherry Liang | Enterprise Editor
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The rotunda of the Law School now shows a more diverse group of people by representing both people of color and women. Taken on Friday, Aug. 23, 2019, in Athens, Georgia. (Photo/Kathryn Skeeon)



Haircuts and heritage: Homer Wilson works to preserve history through downtown barbershop

The University of Georgia School of Law is changing one grant at a time.

Three years ago, Charles Hicks said you could hardly find a portrait of someone on the school's walls who was not a white male. There weren't as many noticeable landmarks or events paying homage to minorities — no international night or celebration of Hispanic heritage month.

Now a third-year law student, Hicks has witnessed and contributed to a shifting climate. Through the law school's grant program, responsive faculty and some innovative ideas, Hicks and other students have challenged long-standing traditions within the law school.



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The New Approaches to Diversity and Inclusion program was initially a larger scale, university-wide initiative announced by UGA President Jere Morehead in spring 2019. The funds encouraged schools within UGA to “recruit and retain historically underrepresented groups,” which resulted in the law school’s Benham Scholars program, which is dedicated to increasing diversity in the law profession.

In February 2019, the success of the program prompted the law school’s Dean, Peter B. “Bo” Rutledge, to create a similar program within the law school. Rutledge allocated \$25,000 in grants for law students to submit their ideas on ways to promote diversity. Of 25 submitted proposals, eight were selected by an advisory committee and awarded a portion of the grant. While some proposals were implemented last semester, other long-term projects are still in progress.

Hicks first found himself frustrated by the lack of progress regarding diversity in the law school. His second step was asking for it. Three of Hicks’s proposals for the grant were accepted — dedicating the reference desk to prominent LGBT law librarian Maureen Cahill — who had recently retired, creating a plaque in honor of Bobby Kennedy’s 1961 civil rights speech at the school and researching to identify the school’s first Asian or Asian American graduate.



The Maureen A. Cahill Reference Desk at the University of Georgia’s Law Library displays a portrait of Cahill on Friday, Aug. 23, 2019, in Athens, Georgia. The desk was dedicated as a tribute to her contributions to the library and the fact that she was one of the first openly queer members of the Georgia law community. (Photo/Kathryn Skeeane)

From the school’s librarians to the dean himself, the projects involve faculty from across the school. The process has shown Hicks the possibility of progress through collaboration.

“The thing with making a more representative and inclusive school is bringing everyone in together to solve what seemed to be intractable problems,” Hicks said.

William Ortiz, a third year law student, said the changes from when he first arrived are striking. He said last year was the first year the law school celebrated Hispanic Heritage Month, and his proposal received a



grant for the school's first international night. As a dean's ambassador, Ortiz provides tours for prospective students and said he is proud to present the projects implemented.

"I can actually talk about concrete events or point to concrete things the law school has done within the past couple months to show its commitment to diversity," William Ortiz said. "It's a weird thing to say that walking around the law school now, I can feel the diversity way more than I ever have."

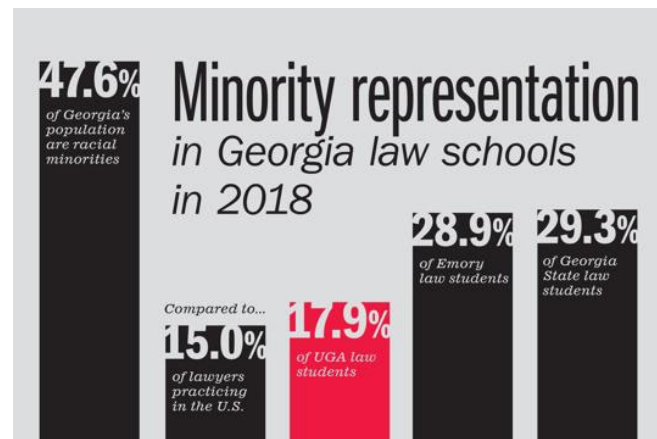
Gregory Roseboro, the assistant dean for admissions, diversity and inclusion & strategic initiatives, said the project has allowed students to make the changes they want to see. Like Ortiz, Roseboro regularly interacts with prospective law students, and said these initiatives are a stepping stone in presenting inclusion in the school.

"It makes me feel good as we travel the country talking to students about the University of Georgia law school, because of the history of the South, we have to be real about it," Roseboro said. "These initiatives ... allow us to say candidly that this environment is open to diversity and inclusion."

Roseboro has been a part of the UGA community since 1980 as an undergraduate student, later earning his law degree and then becoming an administrator. For years, Roseboro was the only African-American administrator. Now, Roseboro works alongside people in several new positions throughout the diversity office.

Jenna Jackson's position as associate director of admissions and diversity programs was created in the last few years with the goal of promoting diversity. From her time as a law student in 2011 to now, the staff and resources to support these initiatives have expanded.

"It's a totally different place now, where there's actual staff and faculty facilitation to help you express yourself, who you are, where you come from," Jackson said. "That, to me, is something that is very valuable."



The University of Georgia School of Law has a lower percentage of minority students than Emory Law and Georgia State Law. (Source: 2018 American Bar Association survey)



Zakk Greene

Reflecting the represented

After the success of the last round of grants, Peter B. “Bo” Rutledge is providing another \$25,000 for the diversity office to fund projects as they arise. While the law school has seen significant change over the past few years, Roseboro said the focus now is fostering communication across the school and maintaining the progress and ideas from the proposals.



A portrait and foyer dedicated to notable female alumni Kathelen Van Blarcum Amos hangs in the school of law. Taken on Friday, Aug. 23, 2019, in Athens, Georgia. (Photo/Kathryn Skeeon)

Being a lawyer is a dynamic profession, Roseboro said. He stressed the importance for students to have exposure to a diverse set of issues and people while adapting to the events shaping the legal system.

“Whether you’re from metro Atlanta, rural southeast, or southwest Georgia or regardless of your race, gender, sexual preference, we’ve got to have a law school that reflects who we are,” Roseboro said. “Because we’ll be training people to go out and represent their communities and their interests.”

Jackson echoed that sentiment in her goal to “one day have the legal profession reflect the demographic across Georgia.”

There’s still a long way to go for the profession. According to a 2018 American Bar Association survey, 85% of lawyers in the U.S. identify as



white, a nearly 25% difference from the 60.4% of people that are white in the U.S. In 2018 at UGA's law school, minority enrollment totaled 17.9%, compared with the 28.9% and 29.3% minority enrollment at the Emory University School of Law and Georgia State University College of Law, respectively. All of these schools, however, trail behind the state's population of 47.6% minorities. About 25% of undergraduates at UGA are minorities.

But Jackson said acknowledging the school's past and the recent steps are the beginning of the road.

"I believe that our strength is that we don't hide who we are and who we used to be," Jackson said. "These initiatives are stepping stones to the ultimate goal of removing obstacles and even the playing field."

Correction: In a previous version of this article, The Red & Black misstated the year of Bobby Kennedy's civil rights speech at UGA. The Red & Black regrets this error and it has since been fixed.

