Public Service

In the 1950s, Professor Karl Llewellyn drafted the University of Chicago Law School Lawyer’s Pledge. Though we do not ask our students to recite the pledge at convocation, I do make an effort whenever possible to bring it to the students’ attention. Llewellyn wrote: “In accepting the honor and responsibility of life in the profession of the law, I engage to be at all times a champion of fairness and due process for all, whether the powerful or envied...or the helpless or the hated or the oppressed.”

True to the spirit of this pledge, our Law School has sent forth many of our graduates to work in the public service. Indeed, some 580 alumni—almost 9 percent—are currently engaged in government service or other forms of public interest work, and 360 alumni—an additional 6 percent—are currently engaged in legal education. Moreover, many more alumni have at some point in their careers held government or other public service positions and many others devote a significant part of their time to a wide-range of pro bono and community service activities.

This commitment to public service is on the wane. Nationally, the percentage of law school graduates accepting positions in public service has declined more than 30 percent in the past decade. This decline, sad to say, is even more precipitous among graduates of the “elite” schools. This should be a matter of national concern. We cannot expect to have good government, a just society or a respected profession if the best and brightest of our young lawyers continue to eschew public service.

As I have discovered so often since becoming Dean, the issue is, in part, one of money. As the total cost of a legal education now approaches $80,000, many students undertake substantial loans in order to pay for their legal education. Indeed, more than half of our most recent graduating class have substantial debt burdens—a third in excess of $30,000—and the average education-related debt is now $37,000. For those students who accept positions in private practice, where compensation for new graduates now approaches $70,000 per year, these debts are manageable. But for those students interested in public service, where compensation rarely exceeds $30,000, these education-related debts are often staggering. As a result, law students interested in public service are often caught in a financial whipsaw.

Financial considerations are not the sole cause of the problem, however. To the contrary, the decline in the number of young lawyers entering public service is the product of a complex mix of economic, cultural, political, social and educational factors. Many of these factors are, of course, well beyond the control of legal education. But law schools do bear at least some of the responsibility, and it is incumbent upon us to help students address the financial obstacles caused by high tuition and to help make them aware of the wide-variety of career alternatives that are available to them in the profession. Like many other leading law schools, the University of Chicago Law School has taken several important steps in this direction.

About one-third of all of our students now spend some time in the Mandel Legal Aid Clinic, where they represent indigent clients in cases involving such issues as racial and gender discrimination, homelessness, the rights of the disabled, and the rights of the mentally impaired. In addition, under the direction of Professor Mary Becker (J.D. ’80), we are now in the process of establishing an Order of Protection Project in which students, working with lawyers from the Legal Assistance Foundation, will represent indigent clients who have been the victim of domestic violence. It is our hope that, with experience in such settings, our students will acquire a taste for the satisfactions of public service.

A major problem for many students interested in public service is that, faced with the cost of their legal education, they cannot afford to forgo summer jobs with law firms that often pay as much as $15,000 per summer. To soften the blow for those students who are willing to accept low-paying public
service jobs during the summer, the Law School has several special funds that provide modest, supplemental grants. In addition, the Law School offers ten $4,500 fellowships each summer to students who work in the Mandel Legal Aid Clinic. And, perhaps most important, the Law School actively supports the Chicago Law Foundation, a student organization that solicits contributions from students and faculty in order to make grants to students who accept summer positions with public service organizations. This past summer, CLF grants enabled our students to work at such organizations as the Woodlawn Shelter and Food Project, the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, the Public Citizen Litigation Group, the Cambodian Documentation Commission, the Cabrini-Green Legal Aid Clinic, and the Mid-America Legal Foundation.

In an effort to encourage student contributions to CLF and to increase the total funds available, the Law School last year offered to match on a $1 for $2 basis all student contributions. This was so successful—70 percent of our students contributed and total student contributions increased 27 percent—that we have decided substantially to increase the Law School's challenge match in 1989-90. Moreover, the Law School has issued a special challenge to students to "devote one day to public service" by contributing the equivalent of one full day's summer salary to CLF. The Law School has offered an especially generous $4 for $1 match for every student who meets this challenge.

Another aspect of the problem—graduates are often so burdened with education-related debt that they are unable to accept low-paying positions in public service—is addressed through the Law School's Hormel Loan Forgiveness Program. This program, which was established in 1986, provides annual grants to graduates who are employed in public service to enable them to repay their education-related loans. The obligation to reimburse the Law School for these grants is "forgiven" on a graduated basis if the graduate remains in public service for two or more years. Although this program is still quite new, several graduates have already participated, enabling them to work at such organizations as the Legal Assistance Foundation, the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board, the Public Citizen Litigation Group and the Cook County State's Attorney's Office.

Finally, effective July 1, the Law School established a new administrative position: Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Public Service Placement. As her primary responsibility in this position, Kathryn Stell (J.D. '86) will administer the Law School's public service program with an eye towards increasing placement opportunities for those students and graduates who are interested in public service. The goal is not only to facilitate placement, but to help establish creative new public service positions, as well. For example, as a joint effort of the Law School's Law and Government and Public Service Programs, we are currently working with Senator Joseph Biden and Congressman Robert Kastenmeier, the chairmen of the Senate and House Judiciary Committees, in an effort to establish "legislative clerkships" in Congress for recent graduates of the Law School on the model of judicial clerkships.

It is our hope that, with such institutional encouragement and support, many more of our students will leave the Law School prepared and, indeed, eager to meet the public service responsibilities so eloquently expressed in the University of Chicago Law School Lawyer's Pledge.

Geoffrey R. Stone
Harry Kalven, Jr. Professor of Law
Dean of the Law School

Please complete the Law School Public Service Questionnaire on page 67.