In the past eight years, hundreds of University of Chicago Law School students have sharpened their legal skills by working for free, representing victims of domestic violence in court, fighting against unlawful eviction, and even combing through hours of audio recordings in a public defender’s office in search of evidence.

In fact, pro bono service has soared at the Law School since the launch of the Pro Bono Pledge in 2010, rising nearly every year both in terms of overall student participation and in total hours logged. Between 2013 and 2017, the number of pro bono hours Law School students had worked by graduation almost tripled.

“Working with the Domestic and Sexual Violence Project, I went to court and represented petitioners in getting emergency orders of protection,” said Carolyn Auchter, ’18. “It was my first time standing up in front of a judge, and I felt like my heart was racing. But I think the more you practice, the more comfortable you get in those situations and in being able to advocate for people’s rights. The earlier you start, the better.”

Pro bono service offers many students their first experiences appearing in court, interviewing clients, or being supervised by an attorney outside of the classroom. Students who take the Pro Bono Pledge promise to work 50 pro bono hours or more by the time they graduate, and since the Pledge was instituted, not only has student participation grown, so has the network of organizations with which they engage. In serving the underrepresented and giving
back to the surrounding community, students learn what it means to be a lawyer—and by developing relationships with volunteer organizations and helping students find pro bono opportunities, the Law School’s Pro Bono Service Initiative supports them in completing the Pledge’s goal.

“The number of students involved in pro bono really shows a commitment to service,” said Nura Maznavi, director of the Pro Bono Service Initiative. “And I think they see the value in it for a number of different reasons. The value of doing good, the value of experiential learning, the value of skills building, the value of interacting with clients—all of the relationships and skills that they build during pro bono service really show the dedication that students have to having a holistic legal experience and education.”

To get a better sense of students’ relationship to pro bono work before the Pledge existed, as well as the Pledge’s impact in more recent years, the Law School surveyed alumni who graduated between 2007 and 2017. Just over 100 alumni responded, sharing thoughts about the Pledge’s impact, the types of skills pro bono work had helped them master, and the lasting impact it had on their careers. Although the response rate to the survey was relatively low and seemed to skew largely toward the most engaged pro bono participants, the findings offered new insights on the Pledge, which was first established in 2010 by Susan J. Curry, the Law School’s director of public interest law and policy.

“When I first arrived at the Law School, I set about trying to create and implement programs that help to cultivate a culture of public service,” Curry said. “A vibrant and robust pro bono program is ingredient number one in creating that culture of service. By offering our students a formal pro bono program with a pledge, and with organized opportunities and a recognition component, this school is doing its part to instill that public service ethic.”

MAKING SERVICE A HABIT

Mary Yoo, ’17, who works in Baker McKenzie’s Global Tax Practice Group in Chicago, arrived at the Law School eager to learn more about public interest. Yoo knew that she wanted to complete at least 50 hours of public service as a student and said that the Pledge helped her stick to that goal. She worked most of her pro bono hours at the Chinatown Pro Bono Legal Clinic, an organization that offers free legal aid to Chinatown residents—and where Yoo continues to volunteer today.

“I got into the habit of logging my hours diligently because I remembered that we had the Pledge,” Yoo said. “I wanted to make sure that I got to that goal. I think it helped in terms of logging my time and seeing the trends that helped me realize that maybe I wasn’t doing as much during one quarter.”

Having a pledge holds students accountable, Maznavi said, and the fact that students learn about the Pledge during first-year orientation demonstrates from the beginning that engaging in public service is a critical part of law school and working in the legal world.

REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE

When students do pro bono work, they help real clients who are dealing with real problems, often putting the theories they have learned in the classroom into practice for the first time. In our survey, 61 percent of respondents said pro bono work improved their research and writing skills, 52 percent said it helped them with oral advocacy and
client counseling, and 46 percent said it taught them how to provide much-needed legal services to the community.

Casen Ross, ’15, who currently works at the Department of Justice, said that most of the pro bono work he did during law school took place through Spring Break of Service, a student-run organization that leads a number of week-long volunteer trips each March. During spring break of his first year, Ross joined a group of Law School students at the Orleans Public Defenders in Louisiana. One of his most vivid memories of that week involved a day when the office received a tall stack of CDs with hours of recorded phone conversations, some of which contained evidence that could have been used against their clients.

“The perception in the defender’s office was that the prosecutors had pinpointed the evidence that they were going to use,” Ross said. “And then to comply with their Brady obligation to disclose information, they basically inundated the defenders with all of these CDs, knowing it would be essentially impossible for them to figure out what evidence the prosecution was going to be able to use.”

Throughout that week, Ross and the other students worked together to listen to all of the CDs and identify any pertinent evidence. The experience helped him better understand some of the challenges public defenders encounter on a regular basis and at the same time demonstrated the impact that pro bono work can have on an organization with limited resources.

“It was a very positive experience because I felt the work that we were doing was interesting, but the extent to which we were useful to the defender’s office was also very clear to me,” Ross said. “Something I’ve realized, even in the pro bono work I’m doing now since leaving the Law School, is that it’s important to find legal work that has a material impact on someone’s life.”

Auchter arrived at the Law School already interested in public service, and she hoped to get practical, hands-on experience working with clients as soon as possible in her law school career. Before she stood up in court to represent victims of domestic violence, Auchter volunteered at the Woodlawn Legal Clinic, a monthly clinic that offers free legal aid to walk-in clients and is located just a few blocks from the Law School.

“The first pro bono work I did was at the Woodlawn Legal Clinic in October, and I actually went every month of my 1L year,” Auchter said. “It was a great experience to get to build relationships with the people who came in, learn about their legal problems—which can be especially serious for low-income people—and help them as best I could. I think all of the people who show up are really grateful for the help.”

Samira Nazem, ’10, graduated before the Pledge existed, and her determination to learn more about legal aid led her to intern at LAF, an organization that provides free legal services in noncriminal matters to low-income Chicago residents. Nazem stayed involved in LAF throughout law school, helping clients with issues related to housing, family law, consumer protection, and more. The housing law expertise she developed working there, she said, helped her land her first full-time job.

“I ultimately landed a job with the Chicago Housing Authority, and I got that job in part because of my time
at LAF,” Nazem said. “I’d had experience working on housing issues and I’d learned about subsidized housing, eviction, Section 8 vouchers, and all these things that were very relevant to the Chicago Housing Authority’s work, which definitely helped me get my foot in the door there.”

Of the survey respondents who did pro bono work during law school, 71 percent said the skills they learned and experiences they had apply to their current jobs. An anonymous survey respondent who graduated in 2014 and currently works at a large law firm said pro bono service had proved to be an asset after graduation.

“It meant that when I started as a junior associate I was comfortable and prepared to volunteer for opportunities on different cases throughout the firm,” the graduate wrote. “My first experiences counseling clients and arguing in front of a judge were both in pro bono activities at the Law School, both of which were invaluable for when I started practicing law.”

NETWORKING WITH LAWYERS

When students do pro bono work, Maznavi said, it is often their first time being supervised by attorneys outside of the classroom, and volunteering at pro bono organizations throughout the city gives them a unique opportunity to become a part of Chicago’s legal community.

“I learned a lot about the different government agencies in the Chicago area and which ones I might want to work at,” a different anonymous respondent wrote. “I also developed networking skills and an understanding of what practicing lawyers expect of me. I particularly appreciated observing courtroom proceedings.”

More than 30 percent of respondents who did pro bono work during law school said engaging in pro bono service gave them the opportunity to network with attorneys in public interest and private firms. Nazem is currently the director of pro bono and court advocacy for the Chicago Bar Foundation—a position, she said, that has allowed her to turn pro bono work into a full-time job. Seeing firsthand the impact that pro bono work has on individual lives led her to this career, Nazem added, and she is grateful for the relationships she developed with the legal aid attorneys she met as a student.

“I happen to think I have the best job in the world, and I can absolutely trace it back to, as a 1L, thinking, ‘Why don’t I go see what this legal aid thing is all about?’” Nazem said. “I still see my supervisors from my 1L internship on a
regular basis at monthly legal aid meetings and other events. It’s a very small, close-knit world of legal aid attorneys, and making those relationships early and staying in touch with those people will pay dividends over the years.”

**INTANGIBLE BENEFITS**

As the Pro Bono Service Initiative continues to grow, so does the variety of opportunities available to students at the Law School. Pro bono opportunities can range from advising clients in the Center for Disability and Elder Law to representing students expelled or suspended from Chicago Public Schools to drafting living wills for US first responders to helping lawful permanent residents navigate the citizenship process. More than a third of survey respondents said they did pro bono work in criminal law, 23 percent worked in immigration law, and 33 percent chose to fill in other areas of law, further illustrating the variety of options and demonstrating that many students seek out pro bono opportunities that line up with their interests.

At the beginning of her first year, Yoo had planned to focus primarily on child advocacy in public interest law. During her time at the Law School, she maintained that focus, but through student organizations, pro bono work, and involvement in clinical programs, she became interested in LGBTQ rights as well as the issues facing immigrant families and victims of domestic violence.

“Doing pro bono work, students can get exposure to things that they might enjoy but otherwise wouldn’t know about,” Yoo said. “If they find a really interesting pro bono
Students who complete the Pledge receive a certificate of recognition from the dean as well as a notation on their transcript, but apart from that, Maznavi said, the benefits of doing pro bono work and fulfilling the Pledge are mostly intangible.

“One of the most impressive things about our students is that they are really doing pro bono for the sake of pro bono,” Maznavi said. “There are no externships, and there is no credit given, so I think the number of students who take the Pledge and complete it is really impressive given that there’s no real tangible benefit in terms of grades or credits or anything like that.”

Auchter is on the Law School’s Pro Bono Board, and decided to join primarily because she appreciated the upperclassmen who shared information about pro bono opportunities when she was as a 1L. She is dedicated to informing her fellow students about these opportunities because giving back to the surrounding community through pro bono service has been one of the most meaningful applications of her Law School education to date.

“Everyone who comes to the Law School is extremely privileged in the educational opportunities that they have had thus far,” Auchter said. “It’s really great to want to give back to the community surrounding the school, or even the larger Chicago area, and use the talents that you’ve been given and the education you’ve been fortunate enough to receive to help people who have been less fortunate.”

At the Chicago Bar Foundation, Nazem works with law firms, legal aid organizations, and law schools to connect volunteers to pro bono opportunities. The Law School didn’t have the Pledge when she was a student, and she appreciates that pro bono work has become a core part of legal education at the University of Chicago and other law schools across the country.

“We are a service profession, and I think it’s generally understood that we have an important place in society,” Nazem said. “We have a certain power and certain responsibilities that come with being a lawyer, and I think it’s really wonderful that that has become a much more mainstream position.”

Ross, too, has carried his pro bono habit into his career. He currently volunteers with the (Washington) DC Bar Pro Bono Center, which hosts a walk-in clinic offering legal services to low-income individuals in the community. Volunteering in the clinic gives him the chance to do the type of client counseling and problem solving that he doesn’t usually do at the Department of Justice, while at the same time allowing him to have a direct, positive impact on the community where he lives.

“It feels like a valuable service, because these individuals otherwise wouldn’t have access to any sort of legal assistance,” Ross said. “I think it’s important for lawyers to be involved in their community and to have a connection to their community, and I think pro bono service is one of the easiest ways for lawyers to stay connected.”

For Ross, it was important to start doing pro bono work early on in law school, and taking the Pledge was as much a promise to fulfill the 50-hour requirement as it was a statement that he was among the community of Law School students committed to public service.

“Just as the alumni office encourages alumni to give back to the Law School early to generate a long-term commitment, I think the same idea applies to pro bono service,” he said. “Once you develop an early commitment to it, you will continue to do so throughout your legal career. It’s important to get on the bandwagon early so that it becomes a part of your legal practice.”

This year, the Pro Bono Service Initiative is launching the Pro Bono Honors award for students who log 250 hours of pro bono work or more during law school. Many students stop logging their hours after reaching the Pledge’s goal of 50, Maznavi said, and she hopes this honors award will lead to more accurate self-reporting of pro bono hours in addition to recognizing the students who go above and beyond in their commitment to pro bono service.

“I’m so impressed by the number of students involved in pro bono,” Maznavi said. “They recognize that pro bono public service is an integral part of a lawyer’s professional obligation.”

Carolyn Auchter, ‘18, discusses volunteer opportunities during the Pro Bono Board meeting.