

Diversity in the Legal Profession with Jissel Esparza Saucedo

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Esparza Served as 2022-23 Mitchell Williams Legal Diversity Fellow at the University of Arkansas School of Law

Jissel Esparza Saucedo was named the 2022-23 Mitchell Williams Legal Diversity Fellow at the University of Arkansas School of Law. She was selected by Dean Cynthia Nance in recognition of her consistent service, significant leadership potential and her consistent work to create an equitable playing field for minorities.

Originally from Jonesboro, Jissel played a critical role in developing the curriculum for the U of A Constitution Day efforts in Pine Bluff and Osceola High Schools—a program designed to heighten awareness of law as a profession in the Arkansas Delta region and other communities in need of resident legal professionals.

Jissel is currently a staff editor on the Arkansas Law Review, serves as the fundraising director for the Women's Law Student Association and is treasurer of the student chapter of the Animal Legal Defense Fund. She has been selected to serve as the Arkansas Law Review Editor in Chief for the 2023-24 academic year and will be the first person of color in the history of the publication to serve in this role.

We were excited to have a conversation with Jissel to learn about her experience serving as the Mitchell Williams Legal Diversity Fellow.

As a student leader of the law school's diversity initiatives, what were your goals for the year?

One of my goals for the year was to get as many law students involved and attend diversity initiatives as possible. I wanted to increase awareness of diversity and inclusion while simultaneously providing students with a learning experience. Another goal of mine included reaching younger students, getting them interested in law school, and equipping them with the necessary resources.

Why did you want to serve in this role?

Throughout my lifetime, diversity and inclusion initiatives have always been at the forefront of my philanthropic work. When I embarked on my legal career, I knew I wanted to continue such work. Luckily, serving as a Fellow has given me that exact opportunity. Furthermore, a fundamental career achievement of mine is to mentor minority students throughout my entire years of practice.

How did you engage your fellow law students in diversity conversations?

Diversity and inclusion conversations can be tough to have. Often, individuals can be uncomfortable talking about diversity and inclusion. I wanted to ensure that wasn't the case this year. Throughout the year, I worked with the DEIB committee to offer effective programming events like Constitution Day, Silas H. Hunt Day, Anticipating the Admissions Panel, and the SPPARK Program.

What were the key diversity education outcomes of the year?

Constitution Day - For the second year, the law school has traveled to the Arkansas Delta to encourage high school students to attend law school and host a pro-bono clinic. This past year, I was the Osceola visitation's student leader, where we held a mock trial for the students and a criminal sealing clinic that assisted over 50 clients.

Silas H. Hunt Day - This year was the 75th anniversary of the historic admission of Silas H. Hunt to the University of Arkansas School of Law. By admitting Mr. Hunt into law school, the University of Arkansas effectively became the first institution in the former-Confederacy to accept a black graduate-level student following the reconstruction era. The celebration featured a discussion on the lasting legacy of Mr. Hunt, and the keynote speech addressed the everyday struggles of first-generation students.

Anticipating the Admissions Panel - As part of Alumni Reunion Weekend, I assisted the DEI with a CLE panel regarding affirmative action. The panel discussion revolved around Supreme Court cases: Student for Fair Admissions, Inc vs. Harvard College and SFFA vs. the University of North Carolina. In particular, the potential impact the cases will have on admissions and how institutional leaders can respond. My duties with the event included reading the submitted amicus briefs to select the panelists to extend an invitation and promotion.

SPPARK Program - SPPARK is a three-week, pre-law-focused academic summer program for rising junior/senior college students and recent graduates interested in law school. The program focuses on historically under-represented groups. My responsibilities included: promotion of the program, assisting in selecting the program attendees, and crafting the work for the summer schedule.

Why is increasing diversity in law school enrollment and the legal profession important?

Historically, women, people of color, and economically disadvantaged individuals have been excluded from the legal profession. True progression in the legal field can only be made when a diverse, forward-thinking, and collaborative group of individuals work together—that is why it is crucial to increase diversity in the legal profession.

What are your thoughts on the future of diversity in the legal profession?

I am incredibly optimistic about the future of diversity in the legal profession! Increasingly, law schools and firms, including the University of Arkansas School of Law and Mitchell Williams, have implemented diversity and inclusion initiatives to help combat the lack of representation in the legal profession. With time and hard work, the legal profession will reflect the diversity of our great nation.