

REIMAGINING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

What Legal Volunteers Learn When They Teach

By Petronilla Sylvester



As the legal profession continues to evolve, so too have the definition and delivery of professional development opportunities. Law firms and corporate legal departments are moving beyond traditional training models, embracing new approaches that align with the shifting needs of both the legal industry and its workforce.

While core competencies like legal writing, research, case strategy, and client counseling remain foundational, there is growing interest in cultivating leadership and interpersonal skills that prepare lawyers for broader roles. A 2025 *Thomson Reuters* article notes that “while many businesses are embracing emotional intelligence at the managerial or even organizational level, this concept can be at odds with the set of hard skills that have traditionally formed the core of lawyers’ stock and trade, such as the ability to be analytical, research-focused, and precise.” The article further observes that “the most successful law departments of the future will be the emotionally intelligent ones that can cultivate deep understanding not only of the needs of the business, but of the global and societal

drivers that are increasingly an integral part of how they conduct business.”¹

This evolving skillset is increasingly reflected in law firm professional development programs, where mentoring, collaboration, and client-facing communication are emphasized as essential to lawyer growth. These developments offer an opportunity for NALP members to support the integration of leadership and interpersonal skills across the legal talent pipeline — a shift they are uniquely positioned to champion.

Experiential approaches to professional development, such as community-facing legal education programs, provide valuable platforms for cultivating these skills. In these programs, legal professionals enter high-school classrooms — often in under-resourced schools — to deliver interactive lessons that engage students with real-world legal issues. While the primary goal is to raise legal awareness and inspire future talent, participants frequently report unexpected professional benefits: clearer communication, heightened empathy, sharper interpersonal instincts, greater adaptability, and stronger leadership abilities.

¹ Jason Winmill, “The corporate law department of the future: The essential skills are not what you think,” Thomson Reuter, January 2, 2025, <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en-us/posts/corporates/future-law-department-skills/>.

As Richard H. Grimes explains in *Public Legal Education: The Role of Law Schools in Building a More Legally Literate Society*, such programs — often referred to as Street Law or school-based public legal education — embody a “win-win-win” model: communities gain legal literacy, students discover legal careers and pathways, and legal professionals hone their own competencies through the act of teaching.² Grimes further notes that these experiences help develop a range of transferable skills while providing opportunities to reflect on broader professional practice and ethical issues. This hands-on teaching approach goes beyond simple knowledge transfer; it actively fosters the interpersonal and reflective capacities that are increasingly vital in legal practice today.

Teaching as a Mode of Professional Development

Programs that place legal professionals in teaching roles requires them to translate legal concepts into accessible, engaging content. This demands clarity, intentional use of jargon-free language, and the ability to quickly adapt and connect with students encountering these ideas for the first time.

² Richard Grimes, *Public Legal Education: The Role of Law Schools in Building a More Legally Literate Society* (London: Routledge, 2021).



For legal professionals accustomed to precision and complexity, the structure of teaching — lesson planning, co-facilitation, real-time instruction, and classroom management — can be a surprising challenge. Yet, it is precisely this challenge that can drive professional growth.

These tasks often mirror core elements of legal work: counseling non-lawyer clients, explaining legal risks to non-specialists, communicating with empathy and flexibility, and collaborating across practice groups. Teaching encourages professionals to structure information more clearly and respond with confidence — skills increasingly valued in leadership and client-facing roles.³

³ Donald J. Polden and Barry Z. Posner, “Leadership Development: Producing Better Lawyers,” *American Bar Association Law Practice Magazine*, November 1, 2024, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/law_practice/resources/law-practice-magazine/2024/november-december-2024/leadership-development-producing-better-lawyers/.

Participation also calls for collaboration and leadership in new settings. Volunteers typically work in teams from their firms or legal departments, creating space for shared ownership, cross-level learning, and real-time peer feedback. These teaching experiences also build confidence in public speaking and storytelling, which are essential skills for lawyers who must present arguments, pitch clients, or inspire teams.

Mentorship and Relational Development

Legal education programs often extend beyond lesson delivery. Volunteers field questions from students about education, careers, and life in the legal profession. These informal mentoring moments prompt reflection on personal career journeys and values, especially for those who may not have seen themselves as role models before. For students from communities

historically excluded from the legal profession, these interactions can be especially meaningful.

Such conversations raise awareness of systemic barriers, foster critical thinking, and promote kinship and support. In turn, legal professionals develop empathy, self-awareness, and listening skills — qualities increasingly recognized as essential to effective leadership.

Volunteers also work in teams to prepare to teach lessons, coordinate with classroom teachers, and deliver content, which creates internal learning opportunities across practice groups, departments, and affinity groups. Many describe the experience as a meaningful opportunity to build a deeper sense of community within their firm or department. “I thought I was volunteering to teach” one senior associate who volunteered with Street Law, Inc. reflected, “but ended up learning how to explain, mentor, and lead more effectively and with more purpose.”

Broader Trends in Development and Employee Retention

The experiential learning components of legal education programs align with broader professional development trends. A 2023 report from the [NALP Foundation for Law Career Research and Education](#) identified relationship

building, leadership experience, and effective mentoring as essential to lawyer development and retention. Legal education programs offer lawyers real-world opportunities to build these skills in a structured, high-impact setting. From a strategic perspective, they also help law firms and corporate legal departments meet growing

experience with teaching can all affect engagement. This makes program design and organizational support even more critical.

Volunteers benefit most when they are supported with clear materials, training resources, and flexible scheduling. Team-

teaching-based legal education programs also function as applied professional development. They offer a unique opportunity for legal professionals to test and refine their communication, mentoring, and leadership skills outside traditional structures.

At a time when the legal profession is reimagining how it prepares and retains talent, experiential opportunities like these merit consideration. They remind us that professional growth can happen far beyond traditional legal and corporate settings, through the simple yet powerful act of teaching. +

While often viewed through the lens of public legal education or career pipeline efforts, teaching-based legal education programs also function as applied professional development.

expectations around value-based leadership and corporate social responsibility. As one law firm talent development lead put it, “[c]lients are paying attention to how we invest in people and how we serve communities. Programs like these help us do both, meaningfully.”

Considerations and Constraints

To be sure, the teaching experience is not uniformly suited to all. Some volunteers feel initial discomfort stepping into a classroom setting to teach, or adapting their language for a younger, non-lawyer audience. Time constraints, billable hour pressure, varying levels of comfort with public speaking, or prior

based and co-teaching approaches can also make the experience more manageable and rewarding. With the right tools and support, these programs can be transformative not only for the students, but for the legal professionals themselves.

It is also worth noting that translating volunteer experiences into long-term development gains that positively enhance their everyday work, may require intentional reflection or integration into broader learning pathways.

Final Thoughts

While often viewed through the lens of public legal education or career pipeline efforts,



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