Pro Bono Scholars Help Close the “Justice Gap”

PACE LAW SCHOOL joined a statewide initiative that benefits our students and also benefits communities—the Pro Bono Scholars Program. Initiated by Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman and announced in his 2014 State of the Judiciary address, the Pro Bono Scholars Program seeks to help fill what Judge Lippman calls the “justice gap,” the lack of legal services available to low- and middle-income individuals. The program allows students to spend their final semester of law school performing pro bono legal services, assisting clients who are financially unable to pay for legal representation.

Seven third year law students make up the first class of Pace Law Pro Bono Scholars.

In exchange for their semester of service, Pro Bono Scholars will be eligible to take the New York State bar examination in February of their last year. Within a week after they took the exam, they began their service commitment of a minimum of 45 hours per week for 12 weeks—real world practical experience that gives the students an advantage in seeking employment, especially as they could be admitted to the practice as early as June 1, 2015.

Pace’s Pro Bono Scholars will gain practical experience representing clients in a variety of matters at Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, the Empire Justice Center, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, the Pace Women’s Justice Center and the Equal Justice America Disability Rights Clinic, one of Pace’s client representation clinics. Placements were selected with an eye to giving students substantial responsibility and meaningful supervision. The Pro Bono Scholars will also participate in a weekly seminar, taught by Professor David Dorfman. The purpose of the academic component is to reflect on the work that the Scholars perform, their placement, explore ethical obligations and further develop practice skills.

Professor Gretchen Flint, the Executive Director of John Jay Legal Services and Faculty Supervisor of the Equal Justice America Disability Rights Clinic, has coordinated Pace Law School’s participation in the inaugural year of the Pro Bono Scholars Program. Speaking of the program, she said, “The Pro Bono Scholars Program gives our students the opportunity to provide meaningful legal services to the underserved while honing their practice skills and preparing for law practice. They will learn first-hand about the legal needs of the poor and will be prepared to fulfill their obligations for pro bono service throughout their careers.”