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By Michele Wojciechowski

Women, Leadership, and Equality program celebrates 15th anniversary of first class's graduation

WHEN IT COMES to gender equity in the workplace, the profession of law has made progress but still has significant work ahead. Maryland Carey Law is a leader in the fight, dedicated to empowering women to stand up for their seat at the table.

One way is through the Women, Leadership, and Equality (WLE) program, which, since its founding in 2002, has helped students understand obstacles they will encounter in a male-dominated profession, engage in research about those barriers, and gain practical skills to navigate their future legal workplaces.

This year, the first class to complete the program celebrates 15 years since graduating. Many have used what they learned from the program to rise to prominent positions as partners, entrepreneurs and thought leaders. This, in turn, has an impact on the profession as a whole. Women, Leadership, and Equality at Maryland Carey Law remains the only law school program of its kind that is integrated into the curriculum for credit.

When Paula Monopoli, Sol & Carlyn Hubert Professor of Law, created the WLE program, women had been graduating from American law schools in significant numbers since the 1980s yet only 20% of



*Professor Paula Monopoli
Sol & Carlyn Hubert Professor of Law and
Founding Director, Women, Leadership, and Equality Program*

of partners in the nation’s major law firms, and less than 15% of general counsels in Fortune 500 companies were women. Women of color were even more sparsely represented in these leadership positions. Driven to understand these disparities as well as provide students with tools to combat them, Monopoli built a strong research component into the curriculum, including seminars in which students read empirical studies that explore gender issues and the law. Participants also write research papers, many of which result in journal publications.

“They’re not just learning these skills in a vacuum,” says Monopoli. “They’re grounded in the existing research. My students will be more effective in arguing for change when they achieve positions of power if they’re aware that these ideas are supported by evidence.”

Building on this empirical foundation, students also master practical strategies for self-advocating. This reflects the program’s commitment to the Maryland Carey Law tradition of integrating theory and practice.

“Women lawyers are terrific when negotiating for clients. They get better outcomes, in many cases, than their male counterparts,” adds Monopoli. “What the research demonstrates, though, is that it’s more difficult for women to negotiate for themselves—for salary, bonuses, or getting high-profile cases, which is important to your success within a firm. Women are



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- Professor Paula Monopoli

socialized not to ask and, when they do, they get much more significant pushback for violating gender norms.”

A select group of exceptional students hones practical skills as Rose Zetzer Fellows. The fellowship combines leadership experience with a workshop focused on topics including personal negotiation, communication, strategic career planning, business development, fundraising, and organizational behavior and dynamics. Fellows also have the opportunity to meet prominent women lawyers in leadership roles who share their perspectives on the pressures, obstacles, and dilemmas they faced in achieving their positions.

Leah V. Durant ’04, owner and principal of the Law Offices of Leah V. Durant, PLLC, was one of the first Zetzer fellows and credits the WLE program with helping her forge her career trajectory.

“When you know the challenges up front, you feel a sense of preparation and confidence that you can handle issues as you face them in your career,” says Durant. “I learned how to effectively communicate with my legal supervisors and my colleagues to let them know that I was a team player, but also had boundaries that needed to be respected.”

Now a supervisor herself, Durant says the communication skills and work-life strategies she learned continue to be “invaluable.”

Faiza Hasan ’17, an associate at Latham & Watkins, LLP, agrees. “Two of the most memorable experiences I had as a fellow,” says Hasan, “were when we practiced our interviewing skills with a consultant by recording ourselves and then watching the interview, and when we acted out a salary negotiation with another consultant.”

About 10% of students participating as Zetzer fellows have been male. “You need men who are as committed to the advancement of women to be successful, as you do women who are committed to advancing,” says Monopoli. Zetzer fellow alumni include a significant number of women of color, as well as several transgender and gender nonconforming students. “Diversity of perspectives is very

important,” adds Monopoli. “It’s essential to rigorous intellectual discourse and scholarship.”

Sarah Shepson ’19, an attorney with Covington & Burling, LLP, appreciates those perspectives. “The development of the curriculum is collaborative, and fellows have the opportunity to not only explore issues related to the gender binary, but also discuss issues of intersectionality related to race, class, and sexual orientation, to name a few,” says Shepson. “The opportunity to analyze difficult issues with a consistent and small

group of people was invaluable to me.”

Additionally, students may enroll in WLE externships at women’s policy or direct service organizations such as the House of Ruth, the Maryland Women’s Law Center, or the National Women’s Law Center (NWLC).

Lisa Yonka Stevens ’04, a partner at Yumkas, Vidmar, Sweeney & Mulrenin, LLC, benefited from an externship at the NWLC, where she explored first-hand the legal issues surrounding Title IX in



athletics. Based on that work, Stevens published “The Sport of Numbers: Manipulating Title IX to Rationalize Discrimination Against Women,” in the *Brigham Young University Education and Law Journal*.

Supporting the Women, Leadership, and Equality program is a perfectly aligned partner, the Marjorie Cook Foundation, whose mission, according to Sandra Gohn ’79, one of the foundation’s trustees and a partner at DLA Piper, is “to enhance the equality of

University of Maryland School of Law in 1925, no one would hire her as an attorney, so she hung out a shingle and got to work fighting for gender equality. In 1946 she was the first woman admitted to the Maryland State Bar Association.

Gohn says the program fills a critical education gap. “I believe that many young women in our society are not trained to be forceful advocates for themselves,” she explains. “One of the things that the WLE program does is help these young women understand that it’s not wrong to stand up for yourself, and secondly, it gives them opportunities and connections that they otherwise might not have.”

Not only does the WLE program help women advocate for themselves, it also gives them the tools to be leaders in changing the profession of law as a whole.

Another Zetzer fellow is Laura L. Dunn ’14, founder of SurvJustice and L.L. Dunn Law Firm, PLLC. She says she used leadership skills from the program to found a national nonprofit, become managing counsel of a national law firm, and start her own law practice.

“The legal profession is very challenging to navigate generally, especially for younger lawyers,” says Dunn. “If you are a person of color, a woman, or both, it becomes even harder. Having WLE helps prepare you for the challenging career path ahead, and it emboldens you to climb the leadership ladders so you can impact the legal profession and make it more equitable and diverse.”

And that is exactly what Monopoli envisioned when she built the program.

“We want women to stay in the profession long enough to get into leadership and power positions. Then when they are in these positions, they can work to change the structure,” she says. “We’re working on parallel tracks. The program gives students the ability to thrive professionally as individuals, with an eye toward equipping them to make the big systemic changes we need in the legal profession.” ■

The Rose Zetzer fellowship is named after a woman who modeled the WLE program’s values—Rose Zetzer ’25, a longtime friend of Marjorie Cook and the sole trustee of the foundation for decades after Cook’s death. Zetzer and Cook were pioneers, together rallying women to picket for women’s rights. When Zetzer graduated from the

Research & Scholarship

When Professor Monopoli established the Women, Leadership, and Equality Program, one of her primary goals was to support research and scholarship in the area of gender and the law.

Since its inception, the program has produced more than 40 scholarly papers, downloaded over 20,000 times by scholars, judges and practitioners from around the world. Publications include:

- “The Shortcomings of Title VII for the Black Female Plaintiff” by Yvette Pappoe ’17 in the *University of Pennsylvania Law School Journal of Law and Social Change*.
- “Gender Bias in the Courtroom: Challenges Confronting Women Litigators and Trial Attorneys” by Connie Lee ’15 in the *Cardozo Journal of Law and Gender*.
- “Addressing Sexual Violence in Higher Education: Ensuring Compliance with the Clery Act, Title IX and VAWA” by Laura Dunn ’14 in the *Georgetown Journal of Gender and the Law*.
- “Narrowing the Gender Pay Gap by Providing Equal Opportunities: The Need for Tenured Female Professors in Higher Stem Institutions” by Claire Rollor ’13 in the *UCLA Women’s Law Journal*.
- “Gender and Constitutional Design” in the *Yale Law Journal* and “Marriage, Property and [In] Equality” by Paula Monopoli in the *Yale Law Journal Online*.

In addition, Professor Monopoli’s new book *Constitutional Orphan: Gender Equality and the Nineteenth Amendment* from Oxford University Press will be published in 2020. The work explores women’s suffrage and the legal development of the Nineteenth Amendment in the decade after its ratification.