

Davis Polk Delivers \$500,000 Grant to Columbia-Sponsored Legal Clinic in Harlem

The clinic director said the additional monies will allow the clinic to expand its scope and hire another full-time attorney to assist the students working with the community on a variety of business and entrepreneurial matters.

By Patrick Smith
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A Columbia Law School program, staffed by students, that provides free legal advice for non-profit organizations, entrepreneurs and community groups in Harlem got a big influx of cash courtesy of Big Law.

Davis Polk & Wardwell issued a grant of \$500,000 to the law school's Entrepreneurship and Community Development Clinic, started and run by Columbia Law School clinical law professor Lynnise Pantin, that will allow the clinic to expand its reach and staff as it works with businesses and startups around the Columbia campus in Manhat-



Lynnise Pantin

tan's northwestern neighborhoods.

"I am grateful to Davis Polk for helping us promote economic empowerment and social innovation among entrepreneurs in New York City communities historically underserved by legal services,"

Pantin said in a statement. "Our expanded capabilities will allow us to answer the call of those who are in need of help as they navigate a broad range of transactional legal matters. At the same time, we



Photo: Rick Kopstein/ALM

Columbia Law School.

can now train more students in core transactional skills that will be useful throughout their careers."

Most of the funding will go toward bringing on another staff attorney for the clinic, Pantin said, which has been extremely busy as businesses in the area were impacted by the pandemic and many residents lost their jobs and are looking to start businesses in order to make ends meet.

"Everyone is home and thinking about their business, and there has been a lot of pivoting," Pantin said in an interview. "Several clients lost their jobs and entrepreneurship is a way for them to move forward. Many of our new clients are people who were laid off."

The clinic offers a wide range of services vital to small businesses, many of which are out of reach from a financial standpoint to a new business owner.

“A lot of what we do is helping clients know what sort of entity they want to be,” Pantin said in an interview. “Sometimes it means helping them understand how to bring employees onboard or making sure they are properly classified. We show them how to navigate trademarks and advise on contracts, among other things. Having our students take a look at these issues really offers a lot of value to them.”

The clinic is apparently quite popular at the law school. Pantin said the clinic has space for eight students to work, but she had 40 apply last semester.

As the clinic operates on the academic year, over the summer there was a buildup of interest as the pandemic took hold and businesses suffered, Pantin said, making the donation timely as the clinic looks to bulk up its offerings to area residents and business owners in coming semesters.

“Davis Polk is proud to partner with Columbia Law in furthering the mission of its pioneering Entrepreneurship and Community Development Clinic to bring crucial legal services to our community members in need,” Davis Polk managing partner Neil Barr said in a statement. “We share in Columbia Law’s deep commitment to combating

racial injustice, and we look forward to continuing to work together to advance meaningful change in this area.”

“This gift is going to allow me to grow the clinic even more,” Pantin said. “We can do more community engagement, more needs assessment. It is an opportunity to deliver deeper engagement.”

Davis Polk’s relationship with Columbia Law School goes back a few years. Since 2015, the firm has partnered with the law school on its Leadership Initiative.

The financial contribution by Davis Polk also coincides with the 50th anniversary of the law school’s clinical education program.

“Experiential learning has been a hallmark of a Columbia Law School education for a half-century. Students and faculty in our pioneering clinical programs serve on the front lines of justice, providing much-needed pro bono legal services to a wide range of clients,” Gillian Lester, dean and Lucy G. Moses Professor of Law, said in a statement. “Our partnership with Davis Polk allows our students to develop and hone their skills as lawyers and also deepens our ties to communities and individuals in need.”

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