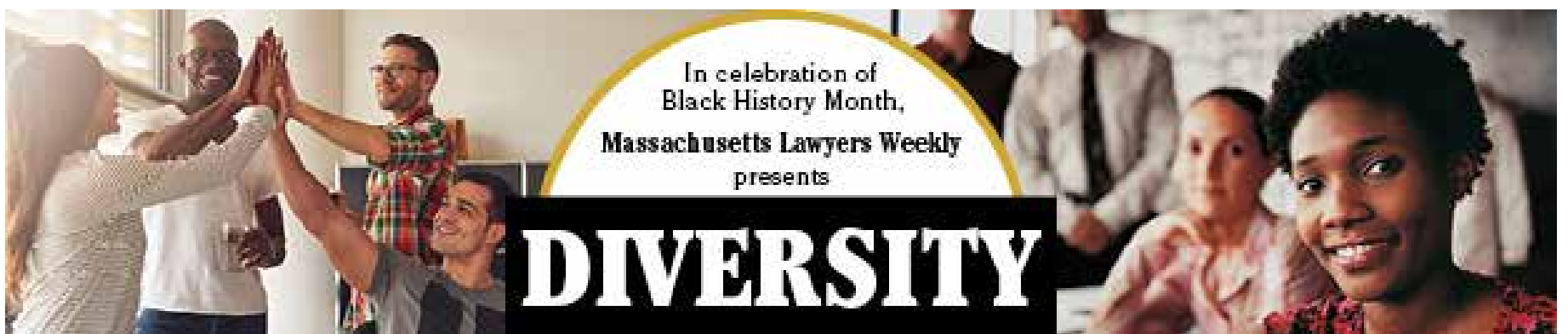


## FEATURED CONTENT



# BLG's longtime leader drives pressing diversity agenda for legal community

The legal industry's struggles to diversify its ranks have proven particularly challenging in Boston.

In 2001, only 2.5 percent of law firm partners in Boston were minorities, compared to 3.6 percent nationwide, according to the National Association for Law Placement. By 2016, the nation's rate had more than doubled to 8.1 percent, while Boston's rate grew to just 4.5 percent. That's better than Philadelphia (3.9 percent), but significantly trails other major East Coast cities such as New York (8.5 percent) and Washington, D.C. (9.1 percent), according to the NALP statistics.

It's a situation that increasingly threatens firms' business, as surveys show major corporations and younger general counsels have begun emphasizing diversity within firms when selecting outside counsel.

For three decades, the Boston Lawyers Group has been a driving force in the effort to help Boston's legal community strengthen the recruitment, development, support and retention of more diverse lawyers with programs including job fairs, internships and mentoring. Since it was founded in 1986, the group has grown from about a dozen law firm members to about 50 members, including not only firms but also corporations.

BLG's longtime executive director, Carolyn Golden Hebsgaard, says that while she sees progress, it can be an uphill battle to convince lawyers of color to consider making Boston their home.

The busing crisis and violence that accompanied the desegregation of Boston's public schools were fresh wounds when BLG was founded, and, whether deserved or not, a stereotype of Boston as a "racist city" persists.

As recently as Feb. 4, Saturday Night Live's Michael Che joked to a national audience that he wanted to see "the blackest city in America beat the most racist city I've ever been to," in the Super Bowl.

But the city's law firms, bar associations and other organizations have made a strong commitment to diversity, and Hebsgaard sees substantial opportunity for progress. She spoke recently with reporter Brandon Gee about BLG's history, programming and most pressing priorities.

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**Q.** *What was the impetus for the founding of the Boston Lawyers Group, and how does it pursue its goals?*

**A.** At the time, law firms were really, really struggling with the difficulty of recruiting law students of color and with retaining associates of color. It started with Andy Urban and Ann-Ellen Hornidge from Mintz Levin. They decided that they really needed to find a way to collaborate with other law firms in the city to address their concerns regarding recruiting and retaining associates of color.

We try to make sure that we work both sides of the street. We're trying to develop the law students of color so that they have the skills that they need in order to

meet the requirements that the member organizations are looking for. And then in return the member organizations are getting exposed to some amazing talent.

At the same time, when we bring students together from all the area law schools for an event, these students of color don't know each other either. This also exposes the students to the idea that we are trying to help build a community of color for our legal community. This is something that is important to the students, that they see other students of color who ultimately are going to be here and become their colleagues. They would otherwise not get an opportunity to meet these students because they are in small little pockets. There may be 10 students from BU, 10 from BC, 10 from New England [Law].

**Q.** *It sounds like the law firms themselves were eager to diversify. If their willingness to hire lawyers of color wasn't a problem, why was it so difficult?*

**A.** Many of the organizations did not have a diversity committee. Now they do. Many of them only stuck with the process that they were accustomed to, and that's it. They'd have a hiring committee, and the hiring committee had a set of criteria. Bang. That's it. They wouldn't even look at students that didn't meet their basic criteria — let's say a 3.3 [GPA] to even interview.

They really hadn't thought about the challenges some students of color might have with being full-time parents or trying to work full time at the same time so they can pay for law school. If you take a student who is working full time, going to law school full time, and they have a 3.0, this could be an amazing student that you could recruit because their work ethic is there. But if you've already established criteria that rules that person out, you are putting yourself at risk for not being able to identify talent of color.

They had to learn different approaches to recruiting, go to different places to recruit. That's a lot of the work of BLG: introducing organizations to some new tools for advancing their diversity agenda.

**Q.** *What were some of the biggest challenges you confronted in BLG's early years?*

**A.** These firms and organizations had made a commitment to advance diversity in their organizations. But Boston had its own set of social ills at the same time, so encouraging students who were even here to stay was difficult. It was the old adage of, "OK, let's leave the engine running in the parking lot so that when I get this degree from this wonderful institution, I'm out of here."

It was very, very difficult back then. And still, people have not forgotten Boston in that light, so making sure that our firms and organizations recognize the importance of creating an atmosphere for these professionals to feel as though they are going to be supported to be



successful, and that they are part of the organization's agenda, is critical.

**Q.** *What challenges persist, and how are firms addressing them?*

**A.** The retention piece is still a big issue. You really have to work at it. If you are successful at recruiting a dynamic student of color, and they are there with you for a summer or two, you want to really make sure that student feels you are really, truly investing in their success.

Mentoring is one of the tools they use. But still, it's more about managing differently. A lot of firms think that they can treat an attorney of color just like every other attorney in the firm and not extend themselves at all. There is an unconscious bias that some people don't recognize they have that makes it easier for a white partner to be comfortable with a young white associate.

If I'm a single attorney of color in an organization and I'm walking down the hallway and my white counterpart I've come in with in the same class is talking to a partner and I feel invisible in that process, then just imagine how that might feel. Do I feel that the firm or organization is as committed to me as they are to the other young associate? Do I feel like that colleague of mine is getting something that I'm not getting?

If this happens more than once or on a regular basis, then maybe I'm going to feel that this isn't the organization for me. Maybe I'm not getting what I need. Is this the place I want to stay? Is this the place I feel I'm going to have a successful career? Then you start thinking maybe I'm going to go someplace else. Maybe I'm going to do something different.

**Q.** *What can a firm do to tackle unconscious bias?*

**A.** They have to recognize it. We all have biases. If anybody says I don't have any biases, then that's not true. Recognizing within yourself what that is will help you change your behaviors and recognize your own behavior. Many firms are getting training and having forums on unconscious bias to expose people to understanding how biases work.

**Q.** *What have been some of BLG's greatest successes?*

"We all have biases. If anybody says I don't have any biases, then that's not true. Recognizing within yourself what that is will help you change your behaviors and recognize your own behavior."

— Carolyn Golden Hebsgaard

**A.** We've moved the needle in terms of [firms] being a little more progressive in ways in which they recruit. When we started BLG, I don't think there was one organization that had a diversity committee. Now I would say that every single member of BLG has a diversity committee.

Now they are figuring out how to best use that platform to work on things that are going on in their organization. They're looking at how they're populating their diversity committees. Change is not easy in old, established organizations, but I do think that they are trying. I really do.

**Q.** *What challenges do you see on the horizon, and how is BLG working to address them?*

**A.** We are working to create a pipeline. The numbers in law school are getting smaller and smaller these days for students of color, especially African-American students. If we can't get them into law school, we can't get them into the law firms.

If nobody in your family has ever gone to law school, then your interest when you're in college is not necessarily there, so one of the programs that we do is our summer internship program for [undergraduate] college students. They work in our organizations in the summer for 10 weeks, and while they are working with those organizations we give them tours of the law schools, and the law schools talk to them about financial aid and getting into law school. We do a mock trial. We do programs with the DA's Office.

**Q.** *What is one of your most important action items?*

**A.** I really would like to see more major corporations that have legal departments, or that give a lot of work [to] our members, get involved. It's a partnership that really makes sense because the corporations are really challenging the firms to work on this agenda.

This is a collaborative platform that could really be very, very powerful in that way. Until everybody comes together around this agenda, the change is not going to be there. I'm looking to the future because I have seen that there can be change if people invest in it, and it's not just a talking head. **MLW**