



Connie Brenton, Chief of Staff and Senior Director of Legal Operations, NetApp

Founder and former CEO of CLOC (Corporate Legal Operations Consortium) Brenton discusses her latest project, Community of Legal Interns (CLI) – a diverse and inclusive program connecting legal interns across the globe, supported by Southern University Law Center.

Diversity and Inclusion Report: US

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A year ago, I was invited to speak at a law school event in Miami. While there, I was introduced to the chancellor of Southern University Law Center, John Pierre, and he said: ‘We’re doing things differently here’. It sounded intriguing, so a colleague and I from NetApp went to visit, with the goal of meeting some of Southern’s students and potentially hiring an intern. It was a life-changing event. When we got there, we discovered that the students were recruited for ‘grit and gratitude’, and they were amazing – one after another, after another.

Their life experiences were different compared to what I typically see for a student attending one of the Bay Area law schools. They’re not generally going into big law – that’s one of the areas to which they don’t have access. Many of them have had jobs for a long period of time, so they have a sense of what it is to work, alongside a passion for what they are studying and why they are studying. There’s a true desire to make a real difference in their communities. There’s an aspiration to learn and be exposed to a multitude of experiences so that they can bring that back and uplift their communities. The school itself is in Baton Rouge, one of the poorest cities in the US, and the students simply have a different cultural background, work background, attitude, and a real sense of grit.

The chancellor didn’t just know everybody’s name. He knew every student’s background and the struggles that it took everyone to even get to law school. Many of them are first-generation college students, let alone law school students. He personally knows them; he personally called and recruited them. It’s a very difficult selection process and that’s how he ends up with students who possess such grit.

After discussing my experience at Southern with Matt Fawcett, NetApp’s general counsel, we decided we would definitely hire an intern from Southern and that we would invite some of our friends to hire interns from there as well. We contacted Walmart, Liberty Mutual, Juniper, Chronicle, Keesal Young & Logan and LexCheck, and those are now on the initial advisory board of CLI.

At the same time, I started talking with Southern and Chancellor John Pierre about offering a combined training program. I have a wide network, in part because of my time

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Wednesday and Thursday during June and July, and if you attend 80% of the 24 sessions, you will receive a certification in personal development from CLI and Southern University.

Then I thought, well heck, if we're going to create a training program for 50, we may as well create it for 5,000. The speakers are so extraordinary that we thought we should open it up to our legal department and across the business. We have six legal interns, but NetApp itself has 140 interns, so we opened it up to all of them – whether they be in marketing, sales or engineering – because what the speakers are covering crosses the boundary of legal and dives into business and general career-based topics. We also opened it up to law firms.

Happily, CLI has expanded my existing network. John Pierre has a broad network of law schools himself, so I have been introduced to other deans of universities. One of them had a group of 60 law schools, primarily from the South, that had been meeting regularly. These schools often don't have access for their students in regions that are outside of the community they are traditionally working in and with. As a result, we've been exposed to predominantly African-American communities, and to a well-organized group of students that have not had much access to *Fortune 500* companies, and these companies have not had access to this group of students.

At the moment, we have about 1,000 attendees signed up for CLI, and the goal is 5,000 before the end of summer – so we want to get the word out. We are recording sessions and, for regions like Australia where the sessions take place in the middle of the night, you can download the recordings and play them at your leisure.

As we get the word out about CLI, the community is really starting to grow. Those on the board are keeping in touch with one another, working on joint projects and working together to build the CLI community. And the students are becoming connected to one another. If you're on during the sessions, you can see them chatting – they are very engaged, passionate and enthusiastic about becoming connected with one another, and they're literally all over the globe. During the school year, we may see it taken to the next level, when some of the students are together in person and they have had a common experience of interning and of participating in the CLI and receiving the certification.

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of law, this is very important, because those are our internal business clients, and any time when we get closer to them – whether it be through our interns or through our technology – we are able to provide better legal services.

One of the most important goals of CLI has been achieving a focus on diversity and inclusion. This has come directly from the interests, passion and commitment of the general counsel, and then, of course, across the department. In the case of this project specifically, the NetApp general counsel has endorsed this relationship from the start – he is an extraordinary leader and can identify when there’s an opportunity. He then empowers me and others to go out and explore.

But D&I is also a natural fit for legal operations. This community is well connected to one another and we are able to collaborate when we see good programming and good opportunity. In this case, there’s opportunity in terms of creating the next generation of attorneys who have a fundamental connection with one another and a focus on diversity and inclusion from before they graduate. It becomes part of their DNA prior to even completing their legal training – so who knows what that will look like in another ten years? Some of the impact is short term and some of the impact is much longer term. As these relationships develop and strengthen through the years, they will change, morph and evolve as these students find jobs and remain connected. As a result, we will have this thread of diversity and inclusion running through multiple different job experiences, geographies, law schools and employers.

But I think this is a topic that extends beyond legal. Inside NetApp, we have partnered with both our diversity, inclusion and belonging group, and also our university and recruiting group. So, connections have been established – not only across the industry and then the globe, but across NetApp.

It has been a bit of a surprise to me to discover there is already a diverse community existing that I didn’t know about. We’re not having to start from scratch in terms of creating a diverse and passionate community – we just have to be plugged into one another. NetApp is located in the San Francisco Bay Area, in the South Bay; there’s an infrastructure here, there’s an infrastructure there, and we just didn’t know about each other. So now, being able to take advantage of years of connecting in our own silos, we can

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By putting together CLI, it's been fantastic to find we have incredible people standing in line and raising their hands to volunteer their time, talent and commitment to help all these interns get started in their careers. Everybody has been enthusiastic when they have been approached to speak, and not only have they been donating their time, but also resources. For example, one speaker is offering online training at a discount for the students, taking away an economic barrier and therefore allowing students to more easily share in her gift and talent.

We're making a difference in the lives of these students. It is so impacting.

INTERVIEWS

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