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# Building BLSA; Doing Community

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## INTRODUCTION

The University of California, Irvine School of Law (“UCI Law” or the “Law School”) set out to do what no other law school had done before. At the time, no one thought that a law school could thrive on a public service platform. No one believed that a new law school could rank in the top thirty during its first year of eligibility.<sup>1</sup> As one of the nation’s youngest and most successful institutions, UCI

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\*\* J.D., University of California, Irvine School of Law. Christopher is currently pursuing a PhD in Sociology at the University of Chicago. Christopher’s passion in research and activism are grounded in highlighting interlocking oppressions that disproportionately impact vulnerable populations and subsequently create praxis that combat interlocking oppressions in communities of color. Christopher pays special attention to state violence, education inequity, and their intersections with oppressed identities. Christopher would like to thank Swethaa Ballakrishnen, Kaaryn Gustafson, Mario Barnes, Stephen Lee, L. Song Richardson, Rafael Gely, Scott Brooks, Joan Hermsen, and Michele Goodwin for their continuous support and mentorship in on-going endeavors. Christopher would also like to thank Dr. Jones, Ike Nnadi, Justice Turner, and Cristen Fletcher who were instrumental in moving BLSA forward.

1. *University of California, Irvine School of Law Ranks No. 30 in First U.S. News Ranking*, U.C. IRVINE SCH. L., <https://www.law.uci.edu/news/press-releases/03-09-15.html> [https://perma.cc/DA3S-ZPE4] (last visited November 2, 2019).

Law did all of these things and more—exceeding expectations and solidifying the institution’s special place in the legal community.

Instead of following the traditional law school model, the founders of UCI Law sought to reinvent legal education. At UCI Law, the “ideal law school for the 21st century” would be both dynamic and diverse.<sup>2</sup> UCI Law’s innovative nature situated legal education in the context of the living, breathing, changing world around it.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, UCI Law hoped to address the traditional law school model’s failure to recruit and retain black students. Diversity in legal education and subsequently the legal profession has both contemporarily and historically been poor. Legal education and the legal profession have long been white-male dominated with minorities intermittently dispersed throughout. For students of color, breaking through the “legal ceiling” and maintaining high enrollment numbers in law schools has been a challenge; black students are underrepresented at law schools—composing only 8–9% of all JD students.<sup>4</sup> Amongst elite institutions like UCI Law, representation is even lower.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the institution’s aspirational goals, UCI Law’s first class managed to recruit one black student.<sup>6</sup> However, it was not until 2016 that UCI Law managed to recruit and retain more than five black students in its incoming class.<sup>7</sup> Recruitment and retainment aside, those few black students who did initially choose to make UCI Law their home faced the task of having to figure out where and how to access support resources. As will be further discussed later in this Note, that place then and now would be an organization named the Black Law Students Association (BLSA).

This Note will walk through BLSA at UCI Law’s journey up to this point—starting with the Law School’s first black student to our current close-knit and active cohort of thirty. It will provide remarks on the future of UCI Law’s BLSA. This Note hopes to encourage other student leaders to strive for greatness at their respective institutions.

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2. *Our History*, U.C. IRVINE SCH. L., <https://www.law.uci.edu/about/our-history/> [https://perma.cc/Y2B9-PMAF] (last visited November 2, 2019).

3. *Id.*

4. Swethaa Ballakrishnen & Carole Silver, *A New Minority? International JD Students in US Law Schools*, 44 L. & SOC. INQUIRY 647, 654 (2019).

5. *Id.* at 654–55.

6. See Carroll Seron, *A New Law School for the 21st Century: A Portrait of the Inaugural Class at the University of California, Irvine School of Law*, 1 U.C. IRVINE L. REV. 49, 61 (2011).

7. This information comes from the personal knowledge of the authors and the collective history of BLSA at U.C. Irvine, School of Law. UCI Law does not disclose the exact data of its racial demographics in compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, in part due to UCI Law’s small population.

## I. BLSA BEGINNINGS

UCI Law officially welcomed its inaugural class on August 24, 2009.<sup>8</sup> This class consisted of sixty of the best and brightest students throughout the nation, 37% of whom were students of color.<sup>9</sup> Although UCI Law's overall racial demographics were impressive, this class only managed to recruit one black student.<sup>10</sup> This was a rather underwhelming statistic for a school that sought to be a trailblazer in diversity.

Initially, there were not enough black students to create what would be known today as BLSA. Instead, most black students joined or were a part of another student group named uRSA (Underrepresented Student Alliance). uRSA was a coalition of students of color, who came together to have a space for discussion, support, and fellowship for underrepresented students. This was a broad group that addressed a wide range of needs. A year later, several students of different racial groups decided to branch off and create racial affinity groups of their own. This would be the catalyst that laid the groundwork for the student organizations we have today.

At the beginning of the 2011–12 school year, two students from UCI Law's second class, Azure'De Wilkins and Tommy McClain, started what was then known as the "Black Law Student Alliance."<sup>11</sup> At its inception, there were fewer black students in the organization than there were nonblack members.<sup>12</sup> The organization, however, was able to survive with the help of allies from uRSA and black faculty and staff.<sup>13</sup> Within a few years, what was known as the Black Law Students Alliance became the "Black Law Students Association."<sup>14</sup>

In describing BLSA's early years, Tommy stated, "There were only two of us, but we were able to be dynamic."<sup>15</sup> Tommy focused on recruiting black students to the school, and Azure'De built support networks for students who were already here.<sup>16</sup> They hosted panels with members of the Orange County black community, such as Judge Fred Slaughter, Dan Alexander, and Demetria Graves.<sup>17</sup> They kick-started the Saturday Academy of Law, a program designed to teach young

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8. *Our History*, *supra* note 2.

9. *New UC Irvine School of Law Is the Most Selective of Any U.S. Law School*, U.C. IRVINE SCH. L., <https://www.law.uci.edu/news/press-releases/04-16-09.html> [<https://perma.cc/NY88-7Y6K>] (last visited November 2, 2019).

10. Seron, *supra* note 6, at 61; *see supra* note 7.

11. Interview with Thomas McClain, J.D., University of California, Irvine School of Law, Class of 2013 (June 16, 2019).

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

people about their constitutional rights.<sup>18</sup> They also hosted a soul food brunch to bring students and faculty together.<sup>19</sup>

Tommy and Azure'De laid down the infrastructure for all UCI Law black students to come. At the time BLSA started, Tommy and Azure'De hoped that one day UCI Law classes would have at least seven or eight black students each.<sup>20</sup> This dream seemed unobtainable until the classes of 2019, 2020, and 2021 stepped foot on campus and changed how people viewed law school leadership.<sup>21</sup>

## II. BLSA TODAY

As UCI Law continued to grow, so too did its black population—and it did so abruptly. In the school's first few years, there may have been four or five black students intermingled amongst three classes.<sup>22</sup> However, since the Class of 2019, there has not been a year with fewer than seven black students in a given class.<sup>23</sup> This sudden shift from few and far between to nearly double raised new versions of old problems for black students at UCI Law. Mainly, where would black students get resources and how might those resources help them succeed in law school? With more numbers, there was a greater need for institutionalized structure. From the solid foundation built by Tommy and Azure'De, the students who inherited BLSA were able to build the organization into one that flourishes today.

To be clear, without the few before, BLSA would not exist nor would the organizational infrastructure be in place. However, because the organization was operating with so few members initially, the organization had not yet been able to account for issues that might arise from a larger membership. This, of course, was no fault of the organization itself because BLSA has never controlled who and how many blacks get admitted nor who matriculates into BLSA. Nevertheless, the foundation laid by the few was instrumental for BLSA's current success. Instead of having to completely build an organization from the ground up, the students who inherited BLSA when there were more members were able to focus on implementing structure rather than creating a whole new organization.

BLSA was founded and built out of the collective acknowledgement that the black experience in law school is unique, especially in spaces which have historically been non-diverse. That is, the black student experience in the classroom, at networking events, and in job placement is simply different than experiences other students encounter. These considerations made it more important than ever for black students to collectively come together to pool resources academically and socially. What resulted was the creation of academic skills, community outreach, and

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18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

21. *See supra* note 7.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

social infrastructure. New leadership in BLSA paid particular attention to these three areas because they represented the core issues faced by black law students.

#### *A. Academic Skills Programming*

First and foremost, to be a successful law student is primarily to perform well academically. BLSA felt it was important to create a safe environment whereby students could pool academic resources as well as receive personalized tutoring. This space would serve to create an environment where students could receive extra help if they needed it, and do so in an environment that was safe. It helped convey academic reassurance but also social assurance because the tutors themselves were references for fellow black students that academic success was possible.

The structure of our academic sessions are as follows: every month, the BLSA Executive Board chooses a topic to focus on in a session. All of the sessions are interactive and require participation. Some sessions focus on particular skills required to take exams, while other sessions focus on key issues students are having trouble with in classes. Once the topic is chosen, the Executive Board reaches out to the professor they believe can best host the discussion. When the program first started in the 2017–18 school year, the academic sessions were primarily hosted by black professors. This was an effort to ease everyone into the process and foster a supportive space with those who are familiar with the students. During the 2018–19 school year, the Executive Board opened up the sessions to professors who considered themselves allies to black students and could take special care in dealing with students of marginalized identities. These sessions have varied from one hour to five hours. When it comes to academic sessions, BLSA will spend however long it takes to ensure everyone's academic success.

2L Alexis Hall (Class of 2021), and incoming co-chair of BLSA stated:

The academic skills sessions provided by BLSA played a major role in my academic success. I did not have a legal background. I did not have any sources of support that could really inform me of the type of thinking law school required or the type of work law school entailed. The academic sessions brought me up to speed on how I needed to be approaching my studies. The professors and students took the time to thoroughly explain legal concepts, study habits, and test-taking strategies to help us succeed and feel more at ease during our first year. As a young, black woman, imposter syndrome crept into my psyche numerous times throughout my first semester of law school. Participating in the academic sessions helped alleviate those thoughts and feelings. By the time I entered second semester, I felt empowered and excited to take on the course load and perform my best. Due to the dedication and diligence of the professors and students during those academic sessions, I saw an increase in my grade

point average after the second semester. I am forever grateful and appreciative of the time and effort they put into us.<sup>24</sup>

### *B. Community Outreach*

Community outreach is of particular importance because representation is incredibly significant. In a non-diverse profession, it is important for black law students to see professionals who look like them so that they can envision themselves in those positions. In light of this, BLSA began affiliating with bar associations, judges, and lawyers in the community so students would have diverse mentors, expanded networks, and scholarship opportunities.

Every month, BLSA brings in a speaker or hosts a panel for general members. The purpose of these events is to facilitate and encourage students to network with the black legal community beyond UCI Law. Our BLSA has been fortunate enough to host several panels of black judges from the Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego areas. Furthermore, BLSA hosted panels entitled “Black in Big Law” and “Black in Public Defense” to show black students that they can pursue a variety of different careers with their law degrees. From these panels, several students have received job offers. For example, during the 2018 summer, two black students received externship offers from Judge Erithe A. Smith of the United States Bankruptcy Court. The following summer, another black student received an externship placement with her as well. Whether it is for a quick opinion on a resume or a formal mentorship relationship, BLSA at UCI Law has built a network that will continue to impact the lives of students for years to come.

### *C. Social Programming*

Finally, BLSA engaged with the community through social programming. With the hard work and dedication of the BLSA Executive Board and BLSA’s general membership, BLSA has been able to develop creative and innovative programs that serve to educate the community, facilitate long-lasting relationships, and make lasting change.

First, BLSA curated UCI Law’s first documentary film festival called “Nuanced Visions.” This film festival touched on issues of race, gender, sexuality, immigration, policing, and politics. The film festival provided an avenue for the marginalized to have a voice both on and off screen because the films encouraged dialogue amongst the students, faculty, staff, and the greater Orange County community.

Second, BLSA had key members plan a schoolwide event on microaggressions called “That’s Not What I Meant!” This event was designed to help students across different identities speak out against the subtle indignities they may experience daily at UCI Law. Many members of the UCI community learned and understood the

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24. Text Message from Alexis Hall, J.D. Candidate at University of California, Irvine School of Law, Class of 2021 to author Rose Lyn (June 16, 2019) (on file with author).

impact microaggressions can have on their classmates and students. This event allowed students of any marginalized identity to present on a microaggression of their choice. After presenting a multimedia presentation, other students were able to approach the presenter and engage in a dialogue. Not only was this exercise a cathartic experience for the presenter, but it provided people an opportunity to learn and grow with people willing to openly discuss their experiences.

Third, BLSA hosted monthly family nights. These were informal gatherings to relax among classmates and friends that included bowling, laser tag, and board game nights. It was important not only to support one another on campus, but also to support one another outside the confines of law school. Additionally, BLSA attended brunch and dinner at a professor's house during each school year. All of these events strengthened our bonds and created a community unlike any other at UCI Law.

Finally, BLSA planned and executed the law school's first ever scholarship awards gala. Hosted during UCI Law's Admitted Students Weekend, BLSA hoped the gala would connect future and current students, alumni, faculty, administrators, and the broader legal community. During the gala, BLSA recognized key players in the community, who were responsible for helping promote the success of black law students and the black community as a whole. This was also a time to recognize the achievements of outgoing BLSA members, many of whom served as co-workers, mentors, and friends. Additionally, the awards gala was a fundraising event to provide scholarships to BLSA's hardworking and dedicated members. In its first and second years, BLSA raised a combined total of \$30,000 for its members. In its most recent year, BLSA's fundraising efforts provided six BLSA members with scholarships.

2L Marquise Findley-Smith (Class of 2021), and incoming co-chair of BLSA stated:

The gala made all the difference for me in my decision to come to UCI Law, particularly because I was going to have to move across the country. To a prospective student, UCI Law looked great on paper: it had recently shot up in the rankings, it was new, in a great location, and had one of the greatest clinical programs. However, in order to succeed in law school (and professional settings at large), it is important that black students be surrounded by a warm and welcoming community. At the gala, I got the chance to see and interact with the black student body, but also the faculty, staff, and alumni that support them. Seeing the full community on display as well as getting a sense of the genuine support within it sold me on my decision to attend.<sup>25</sup>

Through these programs, we highlighted the black community's own unique experiences. We brought our community resources we were not receiving before. We did it because if we did not do it, no one else would. In a way, BLSA was the

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25. Text Message from Marquise Findley-Smith, J.D. Candidate at University of California, Irvine School of Law, Class of 2021 to author Rose Lyn (June 16, 2019) (on file with author).



rose that grew from the concrete—our community had so much stacked against us, yet still we thrived.

#### CONCLUSION: BEYOND BLSA

BLSA has come a long way since its humble beginnings in 2011. When Tommy McClain attended UCI Law's Admitted Students Weekend, he made eye contact with Azure'De and, noting the lack of diversity asked, "Is this really how this place looks?"<sup>26</sup> Now, Tommy is amazed by the community BLSA has created within the law school. Specifically, he thinks it is great to know that a black student can come to the school and, no matter what they are interested in, there is another black student they can be connected to.<sup>27</sup>

Today, BLSA at UCI Law has exceeded people's wildest expectations. People always doubt that our members can manage school, emotional well-being, and event planning. But our members are not just regular students. We are students who have faced adversity and still come out on top. We are students who, at times, have worked twice as hard to get half as far. We are the Black Law Students Association at UCI Law. BLSA does the work and other schools can too with the correct support, leadership, and mentorship. Through this Note, BLSA hopes to encourage other organizations to become leaders of social change in their communities and beyond.

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26. Interview with Thomas McClain, *supra* note 11.

27. *Id.*