

## These five Big Law firms are going above and beyond to recruit young attorneys of color, with some all but promising partnerships

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- Racial diversity at law firms hasn't changed much in over a decade.
- Firms are hiring fast as they compete for attorneys of color in a hot market for lateral associates.
- Perkins Coie and others are dispatching partners to bring in diverse talent and discuss partnership.

**B**rian Li-A-Ping was clerking for a federal judge in Washington state two years ago when a managing partner at Perkins Coie showed up at the courthouse to speak to young attorneys of color.

James Williams, who heads the firm's Seattle office, later took Li-A-Ping out to coffee and told him about opportunities at the firm. Last year, after his clerkship ended, Li-A-Ping joined Perkins as a fourth-year associate in its product liability group.

"Here you have the managing partner of the Seattle office who's taking time to meet with diverse attorneys in Washington," Li-A-Ping said. "That, for me, was a telling sign that they're willing to put their resources behind what's in the brochures."

Law firms have been notoriously slow to boost their diversity, especially among their leadership ranks. Black attorneys accounted for just 3.7% of attorneys at law firms in 2019, a slight increase from 3.2% in 2009, according to the 2020 Vault/Minority Corporate Counsel Association law-firm diversity report, which was based on a survey of 233 law firms.

But some young attorneys of color say they're seeing signs of change and experiencing the kinds of serendipitous conversations that have long opened doors for their straight white male peers. Big law firms are trying to engineer these natural networking connections as they incorporate diversity principles into their recruiting processes.

For example, more than 100 law firms have signed on to the Mansfield Rule, which requires firms to ensure that at least 30% of candidates they're considering for roles and promotions come from underrepresented groups. Many of those firms are also publishing their own annual diversity reports that offer snapshots of progress and profess their goals.

"Transparency is incredibly important for us," said Don Smith, the chief talent and inclusion officer at Crowell & Moring, a firm that uses the Mansfield Rule along with the firm's own inclusion standards that it dubs the Crowell Rule. "We want people to understand their role in the firm, the firm's economics, their



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Big law firms are moving fast to hire attorneys of color in a hot hiring market for associates.

business development, and their opportunities to be leaders and actively engaged – this is not a place we want you to come and just be a cog in the wheel."

Some law firms are enticing top candidates of color to join their associate ranks by laying out what their path to partnership might look like and offering other direct mentoring opportunities. Many top firms are shelling out signing and full year-end bonuses even for lateral associates joining late in the year; recruiters described it as an unusual move that top law firms are making in 2021.

### Associates are exploring firm culture and career paths during interviews

Uchechi Egeonuigwe, who joined Ropes & Gray's business restructuring group this month as a sixth-year associate, said her interviews included frank conversations about what her future at the firm might look like.

"They gave me an opportunity to meet with anyone else that I wanted to at the firm, essentially saying, 'Here's your opportunity to interview us' as they're interviewing me – 'and you show us your cards, we show our cards, and we can both figure out if we are a great fit,'" she said.

Ropes, which is led by Julie Jones, its first woman chair, also stood out to Egeonuigwe for its track record of investing in mentorship programs and elevating women to leadership roles. The firm says



Courtesy of Perkins Coie

Brian Li-A-Ping is an associate at Perkins Coie in Seattle.



Courtesy of Uchechi Egeonuigwe

Uchechi Egeonuigwe is an associate at Ropes & Gray.

that more than 30% of its practice groups are led by women and that women comprise roughly 32% of its equity-partnership ranks. The industry average is roughly 21% women, the National Association for Law Placement's 2020 law-firm diversity report said.

"When a firm is telling you that you are great and we see great things from you, it's really empowering," she said.

Jani Mikel, who joined Akerman as a litigation associate in September, also used her interviews to speak to attorneys at the firm beyond her practice area to get a sense of its investment in associates' professional development.

"I was able to have open dialogue and discussion about what the path to partnership looks like for diverse associates," Mikel said, "and what mentorship do they have in place to make sure that diverse associates, specifically Black associates, are getting the work experience and even client interaction that's really necessary to make those paths to partnership."

#### **Firms are taking a more hands-on approach to recruiting**

To broaden its talent pool, Davis Wright Tremaine is no longer focusing on the top 20 law schools but taking a more "school-agnostic"

approach to considering candidates for associate roles, said Yusuf Zakir, the firm's chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer.

"There's still a lot of elitism around law schools," Zakir said. "You are already narrowing your pipeline if you decide to not be school-agnostic."

Akerman has also been intentional about recruiting diverse talent, said LaKeisha Marsh, the chair of the firm's government affairs and public policy practice and co-chair of the firm's Women's Initiative Network. The firm works with minority- and women-owned search firms, attends conferences by groups including the Minority Corporate Counsel Association and local bar associations, and encourages its attorneys to make personal connections with potential hires who are attorneys of color, she said.

Marsh, a Black woman, said she regularly attended those events to scout talent and pitch the firm's culture to potential associate hires.

"People want to be at places where they feel wanted, where they feel like they will be protected and that their voices will be heard," she said, "and that there are people that look like them that are ascending to the highest ranks of the firm."