

# Pro Bono Challenges and Opportunities: A Student Perspective

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This paper was developed from a talk given by Christopher Walker and Sacha Hibbitt at the Student Pro Bono Conference held in Birmingham in November 2016

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# Pro Bono Challenges and Opportunities: A Student Perspective

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In this paper, I hope to reflect that whilst student pro bono can present some substantial challenges, the rewards earned are invaluable by comparison. My thoughts are based on the themes presented at the recent Birmingham Pro Bono Student Conference by both myself and Sacha Hibbitt, with some further reflection since added.

## Commonplace challenges faced by students:

Those familiar with student pro bono will recognise, and perhaps agree, that the following three areas are relatively normal difficulties at both the organisational and individual level. Those who are yet to undertake pro bono work may benefit from contemplating how these issues may fit into the patterns and demands of their own lives.

### 1. **Time**

The disparity between hours in a day and demands on the time of the average law student seems to grow with each year. Deadlines for open days, vacation schemes, mini-pupillage, pupillage, training contracts, masters' applications and beyond threaten to overwhelm throughout the course of university life. Together with the mountain of conventional student distractions vying for attention, it can be difficult to balance pro bono commitments against these diverse interests. Effectively managing time requires careful planning and sacrifice, which is typically acquired through experience, rather than being readily apparent and evident from the outset.

### 2. **Resources**

With relatively little time available, both human and physical resources are likewise inevitably finite. While the Birmingham Pro Bono Group is fortunate to have a large number of students who eagerly apply each year, there is a nonetheless prevailing challenge to supply for the sheer demand of pro bono work required at every corner. Pro bono facilities can never encompass every need for every client, even with the strongest will in the world. As with every area of community life, a trade-off in resources is required and this can be disheartening at times for all involved.

### 3. **Resilience**

The deficiency of time and resource breeds complexity further still. The potential exacerbation of both of these challenges means that pro bono clients and cases can be difficult, and detaching personal emotions from the situations presented is an inevitable test. At the beginning of your pro bono journey novel situations will seemingly always appear, and more often than not, there is no immediate, neat answer to offer in return. Clients may be distressed by the fact you are a student and not a paid professional with years of experience in practice. Managing and communicating expectations throughout is constant challenge.

## Through adversity, two opportunities:

Yet, challenges will always generate opportunities. There are two ways to categorise those granted by pursuing pro bono work: the advantages accrued by the individual; and the benefit to those around you, both immediately and within wider society.

### **1. Developing individual character, drive and understanding**

During hardship, the best and worst traits are often brought to the fore, and through pro bono work you may certainly experience the meaning of this in practice. The opportunity produced is that resilience and good working ethic can be gradually built around supporting those who are often at their lowest point. You will learn to meet the problems presented by distraught clients in family law matters or employment issues, within welfare reform or immigration barriers.

Overcoming these challenges is where pro bono provides extraordinary career benefits. It is often claimed that pro bono provides the exposure to the practical dimension of law which is sometimes missing from its academic counterpart. For instance, pathways into graduate roles in the legal sector and beyond value the ability to deconstruct initially inaccessible vocabulary into a digestible form; within pro bono work this is a central requirement, and you will improve your ability to summarise and present both orally and in written work as a consequence.

Regarding communication beyond pure presentational skills, all employers value emotional intelligence and awareness. Close client-contact, nurtured by the sizable responsibility pro bono affords, will develop this early on in your professional career. A few hours of time each week pays considerable dividends later on.

Time management and habits are granted the opportunity to improve further. Undertaking work at a Citizens Advice Bureau, for instance, will teach you how to manage a professional workload throughout an individual day; equally, drafting a letter of advice for a client presents strict deadlines with little margin for error. The balancing act of taking responsibility for the pro bono opportunities available creates and reinforces positive habits, especially regarding the sense of obligation towards others you will formulate as a result. With other individuals relying on you, maturity towards your workload will grow.

Finally, the transferability of maturity and perspective to your legal career and personal life cannot be understated. The insights gained from listening to clients, analysing their problems and attempting to provide solutions is a sobering and highly developmental process. The awareness of the causal link between policy – the cuts to legal aid engendered by legislation, such as LASPO (Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012) - and the daily, invisible struggle many face in the background of society becomes truly evident and unavoidable; the vital opportunity provided is the ability to become a vocal advocate for those who desperately require aid through pro bono early on in your career, and carry this mentality forward into your future life.

### **2. Contributing towards the community**

Furthermore, for many students studying for a law degree at university provides the opportunity to better the lives of others; learning to protect the fundamental values which the rule of law seeks to preserve in our society and understanding how to uphold the integrity of

our legal system are pivotal offerings of any legal education. Pro bono offers the opportunity to give back immediately, employing the skills you are in the process of gaining whilst studying for a degree in a practical context.

The work provides exposure to a breadth of society, engaging and informing your prospective outlook on the world. From my own experiences, working with SIFA Fireside in Digbeth we operated as a team to present on Squatter's Rights to local service users as part of a presentation series on areas of potentially relevant and applicable law. This year, we will be working on a Law and Entrepreneurship project with students from the University School in order to encourage new ideas and innovation from an early age. Our eight FLAG (Free Legal Advice Group) Coordinators regularly confront the myriad of issues facing the Birmingham community, taking on hours of responsibility each week in order to solve various problems with volunteers from Birmingham Law School. Fundraising activities run by pro bono societies engender teams to work together to come up with novel and successful methods of raising capital, whilst contributing towards directly assisting those in need.

To be part of the pro bono experience is to experience a fantastic network of support, learning and giving which embolden your own sense of emotional and social awareness, equipping the individual with a fundamentally better understanding of our society. Community Streetlaw, free legal advice and charitable fundraising are all student activities which are engaging the public whilst offering the opportunity to advance and learn new, transferable skills for a future career.

If you are fortunate enough to be able to access the opportunities a university education provides, it is a privilege to be given a chance to empower those around you in a uniquely beneficial fashion a law student might be able to provide. Three years from the distant provisions of LASPO, the extensive literature surrounding the slashing of access to legal aid makes for disheartening reading. However, pro bono work enables law students to contribute towards closing the inequality of available aid and public need, mitigating a fraction of the cost generated through the justice gap. Pro bono work can never plug this deficit in its entirety, but contributing at the student level generates vital assistance towards helping who need it right now. This very tangible contribution is often priceless for those who receive it.

## What next?

As the current University of Birmingham Pro Bono Student Chair and having been lucky to be part of both the pro bono community in Birmingham and beyond, I have been able to work with, help and learn from people across such a wide spectrum; few areas of university life can comparably offer these kind of experiences.

It is challenging to authentically explain the experience of undertaking pro bono, as every individual has a different rich story to tell – the internet, your friends and colleagues are all abundant resources you may wish to investigate. One common thread for the students I have spoken with, however, is that it is inestimably humbling to help someone in need for the first time. This is one opportunity which surpasses the problem of overcoming any challenge you may meet, and is well worth exploring.