Haub Law Launches Far-Reaching Access to Justice Project



The Pace Access to Justice Project (Pace A2J), housed and coordinated within Haub Law's Public Interest Law Center, is serving as a hub for community collaborations, programs, scholarship, policy initiatives, and hands-on innovative academic and non-credit bearing experiential law student and alumni opportunities. Together, Pace A2J is designed to more actively engage students in learning about and contributing to real-world efforts to address the access to justice gap.

Studies by Legal Service Corp. have found that as many as 86% of low-income clients' civil legal problems receive inadequate or no legal help. Then, two years ago, world-wide Black Lives Matter protests and marches erupted, spurred by horrifying and irrefutable evidence—most notably videos depicting the murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery—of the continuing social and legal inequities facing people of color and other disadvantaged and marginalized communities in the United States and worldwide. And, this happened amid a global pandemic that, likewise, revealed and exacerbated these same inequities.

In 2020, the law school responded, announcing a renewed social justice agenda and reiterating its commitment to building upon the school's longstanding work "in the pursuit of racial and social justice in the United States and in the world." In announcing that agenda, Haub Law committed itself to ensuring that students, faculty and staff would use its training, energy, and resources to effect change in the way that law is taught, learned, and applied to promote social and access to justice.

Pace A2J marks a significant step toward demonstrating that commitment, and advances several specific goals set by the law school including facilitating additional opportunities for Haub Law students, faculty, and staff to become involved in community social justice efforts, expanding social justice course offerings, and otherwise promoting significantly greater collaboration and engagement locally to improve access to justice in our immediate community.

"It's truly gratifying to see our vision for our Access to Justice programs coming to fruition," said Haub Law Dean Horace Anderson. "The new A2J Lab along with the complementary A2J Seminar are uniquely providing our students with the critical skills needed by lawyers today to identify, diagnose, and address access issues using tools and knowledge from multiple disciplines."

Pace A2J likewise advances several express priorities set out in Pace University's most recent strategic plan, including offering innovative and interdisciplinary courses, expanding local experiential opportunities by leveraging Haub Law's location, as well as partnering with external organizations to become a source of innovation and problem-solving. Also part of the strategic plan is creating opportunities to attract external funding for research grants, curricular innovation, and entrepreneurship, enhancing support to pursue cross disciplinary collaborations and research, and elevating equity, access, belonging, and inclusion.

Professor Elyse Diamond, Director of the Public Interest Law Center, coordinates Pace A2J, in addition to her significant broader Public Interest Law Center responsibilities, including managing all career and professional development advising and programming for public interest-focused students. More staff will likely be added to her efforts. She also designed and teaches the Lab and Seminar.

"I am incredibly excited about leading the Pace Access to Justice Project," said Professor Diamond. "And I'm grateful for the support I have received from Dean Anderson and others at the Law School and University for the Access to Justice Lab and Seminar courses and for my work with community partners to develop our inaugural A2J Workshop and expand our pro bono opportunities."

"This program is an important step in actually demonstrating our stated commitment to expanding our social justice opportunities and course offerings for students and facilitating collaboration, innovation and greater engagement in wide-ranging efforts to address access to justice gaps in our community," Professor Diamond said.

Pace A2J is an umbrella initiative, which as it develops will have curricular, programmatic, pro bono, scholarship and policy components.

Access to Justice Lab

Pace A2J includes a number of notable curricular innovations. The interdisciplinary Access to Justice Lab had its inaugural semester in the fall of 2021 as a two-credit course. It was co-taught by Professor Diamond and Andreea Cotoranu, Clinical Professor and Director of the NYC Design Factory in Pace University's Seidenberg School of Computer Science and Information Systems.

In the Lab, students were taught to apply a human-centered approach to collaboratively design the prototype for an innovative technology product or app to address a real-world legal A2J problem. Using legal technology to address A2J is a rapidly growing field and involves developing wide-ranging tools, including those to better educate the public about legal rights, court processes, or available legal services, self-help tools and tools that do basic legal tasks, and tools to track and manage data.

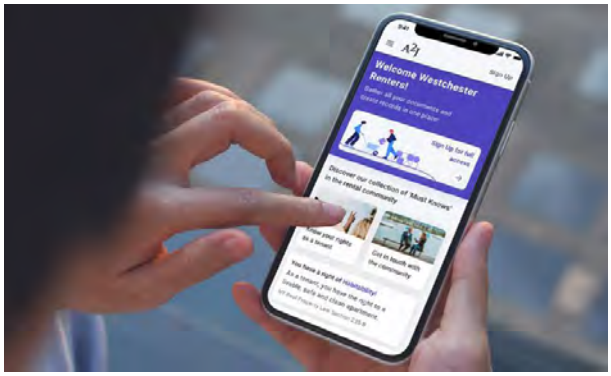
The A2J Lab brought together students from across Pace University to apply human-centered design-thinking and legal training to create an innovative technology tool to address a real-world gap in access to justice. Six second- and third-year Haub Law students, Lili Caparosa, Dagmar Cornejo, Pamela Guerrero, Daniel Guarracino, Gabriella Mickel, and Nina Rodriguez, joined five graduate students, Aastha Bhadani, Aram Stepanian, Pravin

ACCESS TO JUSTICE PROJECT

Shinde, Shefali Kamalnakhawa, and Rohan Singhand, and one undergraduate student, Deye Sarr, from Seidenberg School of Computer Science and Information Systems, to collaborate in the unique, immersive, and interdisciplinary course. The course challenge presented to the students this fall was to help low-income Westchester County tenants facing serious rental apartment habitability issues, and guided students through the research and development of a technology application prototype to empower tenants.

"We tasked students to learn about the complex legal and social systems that impact tenants in Westchester facing health, safety, environmental, and livability issues by engaging directly with community stakeholders, and to identify truly practical solutions," said Professor Diamond.

"Multiple factors including limited affordable rental housing, multi-step and de-centralized complaint processes that vary by local municipality, and eviction fear, lead many Westchester tenants to feel helpless to address even serious health and safety issues in their apartments," she said. "Through user personas, stakeholder interviews, outside research, and synthesizing



The inaugural A2J Lab class successfully designed a prototype of a mobile-friendly web application

exercises, our team explored where in the process a technology tool could benefit tenants and their advocates and encourage helpful legal and policy solutions."

During the design process discovery phase, students researched applicable legal information, statistics, and stories, to help them understand this real-world access to justice issue. "We learned that the housing stock in Westchester is old and unaffordable, forcing low-income tenants who do not have enough housing options or income to be selective, to take or remain in housing even if it is unsafe," said Gabriella Mickel, Class of 2023.

According to the Westchester County Housing Needs Assessment, more than 70% of the housing stock is nearly 50 years old, which strongly suggests a high number of homes are in need of major rehabilitation, and more than 11,000 affordable housing units are needed.

Students also interviewed community and legal housing advocates, including Mount Vernon United Tenants Executive Director Dennis Hanratty; Westchester Residential Opportunities, Inc. Executive Director Marlene Zarfes and Deputy Director Andrew Smith; and Legal Services of the Hudson Valley's Pro Bono Director Christopher Oldi, Litigation Director Marcie Kobak, and Intake Director Shira Galinsky. These stakeholders helped students to understand the relevant legal processes, but also highlighted how effective access to justice technology could be.

After synthesizing information from the research phase, students spent several weeks developing a prototype for a website application meant to help address the power imbalance between tenants and landlords in Westchester. The tool, which would be accessible in English and Spanish, was designed to allow mobile users to learn their rights and to record and track habitability issues in one easy-to-navigate place. It includes a resources section, a record-keeping feature with document generation and a checklist, data analytics to collect anonymous information that can be used for advocacy efforts, and a forum with private messaging.

The Lab culminated in a team presentation and prototype demonstration to select stakeholders and faculty. Students came away from the experience with a deeper understanding about the barriers facing lower income tenants and how to help them navigate local legal and related processes. The inaugural A2J Lab class prototype design is so potentially impactful, that the group is pursuing funding for the web application through private funders and competitions, to make this solution available to the public.

The Lab course is especially timely because legal employers want law graduates to be comfortable using technology tools, and in some cases to help innovate to use tech to improve A2J or practice, and law schools around the country are building A2J awareness and tech training into their curriculum.

"The A2J Lab was a very informative, hands-on experience that challenged me to thoroughly understand the



Professor Elyse Diamond worked with students Gabriella Mickel, Lili Caparosa, and Daniel Guarracino to create a business plan and refined A2J project presentation for a Law Student Innovation Competition where the team ultimately placed first.

individual that I want to help, rather than rely on my prior assumptions," said Pamela Guerrero, a 3L participant.

"Ultimately, we created a prototype of a mobile-friendly web application that has a resources section with analytics, a record-keeping feature with document generation and a checklist, and a forum with private messaging. After the class, a few of us got to help present the prototype to Majority Leader of the New York State Senate Andrea Stewart-Cousins. We also entered our idea in a Law Student Innovation Competition sponsored by Brooklyn Law School and a second, the Georgetown Law sponsored Iron Tech Invitational," said Mickel.

The **9th Annual Stanley M. Grossman Innovators Invitational** is an annual event held by The Center for Urban Business Entrepreneurship (CUBE) at Brooklyn Law School. Competitors are invited to develop and pitch their legal technology startups to a prestigious panel of judges, including industry professionals, entrepreneurs, and investors, to compete for prize money to help launch their ventures. This spring, the Haub Law team of three students from the Lab, Mickel, Caparosa and Guarracino, worked with Professor Diamond to create a business plan and refined A2J project presentation for the competition and **placed first**, winning the Invitational's Manne Prize and $9,000 to help launch the project from an idea into reality.

Mickel said further that the most valuable aspect of the class was working on an interdisciplinary team. "In law school, we are put into a bubble and only work with other law students. In the real world, lawyers are part of interdisciplinary teams with various expertise, perspectives, and opinions. Learning to work and communicate in this type of setting has better prepared me to work in the legal profession. This lab is a unique opportunity law students should take advantage of. The professors were also outstanding," she said.

Daniel Guarracino, Class of 2023, said through his work in the Lab he learned about the power imbalance between tenants and landlords, and issues including habitability that residents face in Westchester.

"The lack of affordable housing pushes people without financial resources to knowingly take unsafe housing. Furthermore, brokers and landlords are putting up barriers to prevent housing voucher holders—and that this disproportionately impacts who are overwhelmingly people of color and people with disabilities—from living all over Westchester. People are afraid to act on their own behalf because they do not know their rights. They think that complaining about habitability issues can get them evicted. We also learned that renters can be more effective when they act collectively. That is why we incorporated a group forum feature into our prototype website."

Third-year law student Lili Caparosa, a fall 2021 A2J Lab student and part of the law student team presenting the Lab prototype idea at the Brooklyn Law Legal Tech Innovation Invitational and Iron Tech Invitational, shared this about her experience: "I have loved participating in the Lab and the [Innovation] Competitions because they have given me the opportunity to directly address issues within the community. It has been

ACCESS TO JUSTICE PROJECT



Professor Elyse Diamond

"This program is an important step in actually demonstrating our stated commitment to expanding our social justice opportunities and course offerings for students and facilitating collaboration, innovation and greater engagement in wide-ranging efforts to address access to justice gaps in our community."

exciting to work with students across different disciplines and see how we can all work to address injustices."

Nina Rodriguez, also a 3L, called the A2J Lab a "one-of-kind experience."

"I improved my interview and public speaking skills through the class and feel more confident in those skills. I enjoyed learning about the design process in creating apps and websites, which I may not have had the opportunity to do otherwise. I left the class with invaluable experiences that will benefit me in my legal career," she added.

Access to Justice Seminar

Another curricular component of Pace A2J is the Access to Justice Seminar. Offered as a two-credit course each spring and taught by Professor Diamond, the A2J Seminar is a scholarly writing course that satisfies the law school's upper-level writing requirement. Seminar students gain a foundation in wide-ranging access to justice issues that are increasingly relevant to both public interest and private sector legal practice, by drafting and presenting a compelling scholarly paper on an access to justice issue.

Students receive highly individualized guidance and feedback, and have the opportunity to brainstorm with and hear from guest speakers on access to justice issues relating to the intersection of social justice and technology, climate and other environmental justice, criminal justice, immigration, health law, voting rights, and housing, to name a few issue areas. The work produced in the workshop is hoped to be of a quality that could be refined for publication in a scholarly journal or other legal or social justice periodical, or even serve as a basis for a public interest fellowship proposal.

This spring, the A2J Seminar hosted several guest lecturers, including several Haub Law alumni, who spoke about their work in areas including affordable housing, environmental justice and human rights, voting access, and criminal justice reform. Exposing students to lawyers engaged in this work deepens their understanding about the law and a lawyer's obligation to improve access, encourages them to think creatively and analytically about solutions, and prepares them to engage with practitioners about current access issues.

A2J Seminar participant Danielle Maffei, whose spring 2022 scholarly paper proposes legislative action to prohibit laws and policies that effectively decriminalize homelessness, said: "I have always wanted to serve the public through law. After learning about [Westchester County's collaborative criminal diversion program for nonviolent offenders] the Fresh Start Initiative in my Access to Justice Seminar, it inspired

me even more. I was also able to engage about this and other initiatives during my interview process with the Westchester County District Attorney's Office. I enthusiastically accepted a post-graduate offer from that Office, and I look forward to working as a prosecutor and advancing justice in my home county."

These courses are designed to leverage and integrate significant participation by lawyers and community advocates working on access to justice—as subject matter mentors, speakers, and experts—which builds the law school's reputation and relationships and provides extensive networking and other benefits to students.

Experiential Learning and Pro Bono

A third key component of the Access to Justice Project involves experiential learning and pro bono dimensions. The project is expanding and formalizing the law school's pro bono and volunteer opportunities in conjunction with several community and government partners. Haub Law has had discussions with the 9th Judicial District of the New York State Unified Court System Access to Justice Committee; the New York State Judicial Institute and its Dean, Judge Kathie Davidson; contacts at the Westchester District Attorney's Office; the New York Legal Hand program; a Westchester County Legislator; and major area direct legal services organizations including Hudson Valley Legal Services and Legal Services of the Hudson Valley.

Discussions seek to more formally engage Haub students in shorter term, non-credit bearing A2J pro bono or other volunteer roles throughout the court and legal system. These engagements supplement the more formal externships conducted through the law school John Jay Legal Services clinical and externships. A few students have already been connected to pro bono opportunities with the Westchester Courts and Legal Services of the Hudson Valley. This spring, for example, through the Public Interest Law Center's expanded A2J Project pro bono collaborations with the Westchester Courts—and key partners including Court Attorney Referee Sheila Gabay—third-year law student Austin Sharron earned pro bono hours by performing legal research and attending conferences on foreclosure and other civil law matters in the Westchester County Courts.

As these new access to justice projects continue to become formalized, Professor Diamond will manage the opportunities that will fall within the Pace A2J umbrella so that pro bono projects operate professionally and seamlessly transition from year to year without interruption.

A final key component of Pace A2J consists of policy development, scholarship, and advocacy. Haub Law is a thought leader on access to justice issues, and it is promoting innovation and action to fill gaps in access to justice. Working with the New York State Judicial Institute Board Chair, Dean Anderson has proposed renewed scholarly collaboration between the Judicial Institute and the Law School on access to justice issues. In addition, the Pace A2J hopes to host short-term public service law practitioners-in-residence on campus to provide career guidance, practice area presentations and research opportunities for students.

Plans are also being developed to convene workshops and forums to translate programs, research and training into concrete solutions, including legislative and policy solutions. Workshop output will form the basis for legislative and policy proposals to public officials. In fact, in March, Professor Diamond, working closely with the Hudson Valley Justice Center Executive Director Virginia Foulkrod, a Haub Law alumna, and its Director of Litigation Director Jason Mays, coordinated Haub Law's inaugural **Access to Justice Workshop: Spotlight on Housing**. The workshop brought together community leaders, legal services lawyers, advocates, and law school faculty, staff, and students to engage in dialogue centering on the critical importance of housing access, the current housing crisis, the status of "right to counsel" in eviction cases, and public service careers in housing law and related fields.

Through an expert panel discussion and breakout discussions with the panelists and tenant advocates, this workshop was designed to educate attendees about housing access gaps, advocacy and representation, and careers, and to provide a forum to discuss innovative ways the law school and its students and community partners are and can continue contributing to efforts to address the gaps in housing access in our community.

The panel was moderated by Mays, and the expert panelists were Andrew Scherer, Policy Director, Impact Center for Public Interest Law & Visiting Associate Professor, New York Law School; Marika Dias, Managing Director at Safety Net Project, Urban Justice Center; and Marcie Kobak, Director of Litigation, Legal Services of the Hudson Valley. Westchester resident Marilyn Martinez joined the panel as well to share her personal experience as a tenant who had to navigate multiple cases in Westchester housing court proceedings. The guided workshop generated concrete and innovative ideas and action steps to promote Haub Law student engagement in housing law and access.

Finally, Haub Law is looking for further ways to encourage collaboration and facilitate the New York bench and bar in joining efforts to enhance access to justice locally and beyond.

"These academic experiences, combined with practical training through our partnerships with Westchester County courts, the New York State Judicial Institute and other community partners will lay the groundwork for students to make a real impact in racial and social justice reform," Dean Anderson said. ■