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Pro Bono Not Limited To Litigation

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When lawyers think of pro bono, they usually think of litigation or maybe helping out in adoption or political asylum cases. Less known are the opportunities to do transactional pro bono work.

Earlier this month, 50 summer associates from nearly two dozen major law firms attended a seminar in downtown Los Angeles on the benefits of doing corporate pro bono work. The program included an overview of tax-exempt laws and organizations - from the 17th century Statute of Charitable Uses enacted by the British Parliament to the 21st century formation of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation - and the basics of forming and advising non-profits.

The program is the brainchild of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom in collaboration with Public Counsel and the Los Angeles County Bar Association. As far as anyone involved in the program knows, it is the only one of its kind in the nation.

Started four years ago for summer associates, the seminars went so well that the group added another training session in the fall for first-year associates.

"Skadden has a history of encouraging pro bono involvement," said corporate partner David Eisman, a panelist for the seminars. "But we decided to do a separate seminar on corporate transactional pro bono work to dispel the thinking that pro bono work is just for litigation.

"Some people feel comfortable doing litigation. Some people are more comfortable doing transactional work."

Recent examples of Skadden's transactional pro bono work include representing Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation in its merger with the University of Southern California to set up the Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History, which archives accounts of Holocaust survivors. The firm also represented the American Jewish University pro bono in its acquisition of a television network.

Tax lawyer Louis E. Michelson, another seminar panelist, instructs attendees on how to obtain tax exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service. The application is a daunting 25 pages, he said, and if it isn't filled out exactly right, it's rejected.

"The goal is to train some of the new lawyers to not be afraid of jumping into the deep water and swimming," Michelson said.

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