

# JusticeCorps: Community Engagement Matters

Rayna Jackson | Undergraduate Education Initiatives

This academic year, 135 JusticeCorps members from six local universities will log an impressive 40,500 hours of community service in the Los Angeles Superior Court System. This may seem like a lot of work – and it is, but that doesn't keep hundreds of students from applying to JusticeCorps each year.

One of the primary reasons that UCLA students apply to the program is because JusticeCorps' members provide assistance to self-represented litigants who have cases pending in court, but often cannot afford an attorney. It is substantive community work in a legal environment that draws students like third year Political Science major, Roxanna Martinez, to JusticeCorps.

*"I joined the program because I like to do a lot of service work. But I've never done legal service work. I'm usually involved with youth, so I decided to try this,"* said Martinez. Martinez is hoping to get more legal experience so she can one day be an immigration lawyer. She is committed to working 300 hours with self-represented litigants.

According to JusticeCorps, many petitioners

face obstacles in their attempts to resolve important legal matters. Their biggest stumbling blocks include a lack of familiarity with legal terms and mandatory forms and an inability to follow or fully comprehend court proceedings or orders given in court. JusticeCorps' Program Director, Dr. Jennifer Kalish, notes that there are over 50,000 cases where students have helped litigants.

The work done by UCLA students has not gone unnoticed by Los Angeles County Superior Courts. The University provides the largest cohort of 51 students to the program per year.

According to the Los Angeles Superior Court System, if undergraduates from UCLA were not committed to community engagement, thousands of litigants would not be assisted. Kalish acknowledges that, *"The court is helped because we can process more forms on behalf of litigants. Before JusticeCorps, forms were constantly rejected by the court, and now, with the*



JusticeCorps members Martinez and Luna work 'The Floor', where litigants go for general legal assistance.

*help of these undergraduate students, people from the public are guided through the process, and can get their voice before a Judge.”*

JusticeCorps attorney Erica Dabbs is in agreement with this assessment. Each day, there can be 30-40 people waiting to be served, with twice as many in line just hoping to get an appointment. *“If we didn’t have the undergrads, we would be helping a third of the litigants -if that at all. Volume wise, it’s a huge help. There are a couple months out of the year where we don’t have the undergrads, and it is a very different place.”*



Attorney Dabbs and UCLA JusticeCorps Fellow, Polanco work with litigants. Fellows are alumni who commit to serving 1700 during the course of a year.

JusticeCorps students don’t just log large community service hours; they also bring an energy and passion to a work environment which, Dabbs admits, can get emotionally challenging at times.

*“Honestly, it’s a real energy boost having students. We work in a very busy and stressful place but having the students here every year helps with the longevity of the staff. It reminds us to take a step back, and it forces us to be present and available to them. As attorneys, we get to teach them what we do, why we care about it, and why it’s important.”*

Students find that JusticeCorps provides meaningful engagement with the community. Dr. Douglas Barrera, Assistant Director at the UCLA Center for Community Learning and UCLA liaison to Los Angeles Superior Courts, believes that this interaction is essential to the JusticeCorps experience. *“JusticeCorps members can see the impact that they’re having by being civically engaged. But more than that, by listening to and talking with litigants, they begin to understand just how important it is that people have equitable access to the courts.”*

Those interested in participating in JusticeCorps are encouraged to submit their application by the end of Spring Quarter. Applications submitted after Spring Quarter will be reviewed as part of a rolling deadline through the end of summer or until positions are filled.

JusticeCorps is part of the [Center for Community Learning](#). For more information on how to apply, please visit the program’s [website](#).