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Constitution Day: An Opportunity for Paralegal Educators to Design Creative Law Learning Activities for the Entire College/University Community

Marissa J. Moran, New York City College of Technology

ONE COLLEGE'S INITIATIVES

On August 30, 2005, the Provost of my college, New York City College of Technology ("City Tech" or the "College") and I met to discuss some student testing related issues. During the course of our conversation she asked if I would be interested in initiating activities for Constitution Day at the College. I was pleased to have been asked to become involved in this special day and immediately began to think of various ways of getting our students, faculty, staff and administration actively participating in it as well.

The U.S. Constitution has been a special and important document to me, even at a young age. My first memory of our courts and the legal system consists of a welcoming American flag and a man in a long black robe. You see, I attended my father's citizenship

Constitution Day Mandate

On September 17, 1787 the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention completed and signed the U.S. Constitution. To commemorate this momentous event in our country's history, a law was passed designating September 17th as Constitution Day, formerly known as Citizenship Day. Pursuant to this law, institutions of higher education are required to hold educational programs on the U.S. Constitution on or around September 17th.

hearing, and I believe that it was at that moment in time that my interest in the law began. My father's impressive knowledge of the history of our country, something we who are born here often take for granted, his devotion to its ideals, freedoms, rights, values and most importantly his respect and admiration for the people who created this government as well as the people who gave and give their lives fighting for its

continuance has always made me proud to be an American and proud of the democracy I was fortunate to have been born in.

With only twenty days to plan, organize and actually schedule the Constitution Day event, I thought of three activities that could easily be implemented. First, have everyone dress in red, white or blue on that day. Second, get our littlest citizens in on the activities

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Constitution Day *Continued*

(City Tech has a Children's Center facility) by reading a story based on some aspect of the Constitution in a read aloud session. The book "We the Kids" written by David Catrow was chosen. The third idea was to have an enlarged version of the U.S. Constitution on display in a well-trafficked area, thus allowing for those in the college community to sign their names like the delegates had done over 200 years ago.

DEVELOPING INSTRUCTIONAL INTERACTIVE LEARNING ASSIGNMENTS

The next plan was to design creative critical thinking assignments and possibly use technology to accomplish this goal. Thus came the idea to create an electronic compilation of personal reflections on the Constitution. Students, faculty, and administrators were among the contributors as well as a State Senator and our Borough

President. Some of these excerpts are provided (see inset below). Through the efforts of one of my colleagues, who is the Director of E-Portfolio at the College, a PowerPoint presentation of this compilation of reflections was created with accompanying constitutional music and was shown at various points throughout the day.

Another vehicle to showcase student work was through the use of display boards. My Introduction

We the People of New York City College of Technology as well as our local and state government and community leaders, do hereby share our thoughts, ideas and beliefs regarding the Constitution, the Supreme Law of the Land of our great nation, on this September 20, 2005, known as Constitution Day.

"As we celebrate Constitution Day in the United States of America, we must remember that it was our founding fathers who created this great nation we live in. With the signing of the Constitution, the greatest democracy that has ever been created on the face of this earth was established. It was our founding fathers who have guaranteed our rights and our liberties. God Bless America now and forever."

State Senator Martin J. Golden, 22nd District

"Having devoted my life to public service, I can say that few documents affirm the enormous responsibility of that role more than our Constitution. It is truly humbling to build on and strengthen the centuries-old foundation of democracy in a place like Brooklyn that is as close as you can get to the American Dream. The Founding Fathers might not have envisioned bagels, cheesecake, and falafel, but Brooklyn's diversity, equality, and opportunity are exactly what they had in mind!"

President Marty Markowitz, Brooklyn Borough

"When our Constitution was written more than 200 years ago, almost nothing resembled the way we live now. This was largely a country of farmers. Most men had very little education; women had even less or none at all. Slavery was an important part of the American economy, not only in the South but here in New York City. Except for the African Americans who were brought as slaves, there was little diversity. Nevertheless, the founders' vision, embodied in this document and in the institutions it set forth, was that it was possible to balance the common good with individual freedoms. It took many years before equal rights were extended to former slaves, and even longer before women had the vote, but the founders gave us the mechanism to achieve these things—something they themselves may not have foreseen. With each extension of individual freedom and equality, the common good was enriched. Now, so many years later, we cannot possibly understand all that was in the minds of the founders. When I read the words that begin the document that they gave us, however, and look at the diverse human beings now represented by those words, "We, the people of the United States," I believe that although the Constitution's signers never imagined this, their vision made it possible, and they would be proud of it."

Bonne August, Acting Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs for New York City College of Technology

Constitution Day *Continued*

to Paralegal Studies class work included original poetry creations based on Constitutional themes, “Ask the Founding Fathers A Question” and “What Qualities Should A Good Leader Possess” memos. My Legal Document Preparation, Legal Research II and Constitutional Law classes also contributed writing assignments based on such concepts and ideas as liberty, democracy and freedom, just to name a few. Other display boards were designed to pay tribute to our three branches of government. The board for the Executive Branch included a timeline of the Presidents from the 1930s until today with inspiring portions of inaugural addresses, or great speeches given by these presidents. In honor of the Judiciary Branch a “Law Is Cool” theme board was designed. Also, a “Picture You Here” feature — showing a vacant seat on the Supreme Court — was another aspect of this display board. A Legislative current event board with historical highlights was dedicated to our Congress and Senate leaders as well as world leaders such as Martin Luther King.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL OUTREACH

Also on display on Constitution Day were two giant American Flags made of cutout handprints of children to affirm their commitment to the U.S. Constitution, and two scrolls depicting the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution in “pictures” to help explain these words. The works of

art were all created by children in grades Kindergarten through five from local public elementary schools that I visited and read to and with whom I discussed the Constitution.

SEPTEMBER 20, 2005 — CONSTITUTION DAY AT CITY TECH

On the actual day at City Tech a schedule of events was planned.

The heart of the day or main event was the actual reading of select portions of our U.S. Constitution and then reciting the meaning (in plain English) of that particular Article or Amendment. The reading hour began with everyone in the audience reciting the Preamble. Thereafter, students, faculty, staff, administrators and one of our writing fellows all took turns reading from the Constitution on stage in the Atrium Amphitheater, also dubbed Constitutional Hall for that day.

Some college students role-played during the “You Be The Judge Hour,” when facts from real life cases were read by them and the audience had to decide the outcome in that matter. The student-judge then revealed the actual decision in the case. Students even donned the robes of a judge to get a truer appreciation for the responsibility that comes with this job. Factual posters on Constitutional Law declaring, “Did You Know?” were hung in various places throughout the college so that everyone could test their knowledge of the U.S.

Constitution. Trivia crossword puzzles and fact sheets were available to instructors to utilize in their individual classes if they chose. Constitutional Law based tapes and movies were also shown throughout the day for anyone who wanted to stop by at their convenience and when their schedule allowed between or after classes and meetings.

REFLECTION

The vision for diverse and multi-level participation in the Constitutional theme events became a reality. The fun based day of learning, with a variety of type of activities from which members of the entire college community were able to choose, allowed everyone to become more familiar with the U.S. Constitution and its relevance in our daily lives. After the event was concluded, my tremendous respect for the awe-inspiring work of our founding fathers was that much greater. Reflecting upon the events leading up to that day as well as the day itself, I came away feeling that we at City Tech had created a piece of our own constitutional history. ■

Marissa J. Moran is an associate professor in the Department of Law & Paralegal Studies at New York City College of Technology. If you would like to receive any of the assignments she developed in conjunction with Constitution Day, you may do so by emailing Prof. Moran at mmoran@citytech.cuny.edu.