

Consumer Law Advocates, Students, and Scholars

A joint project of the National Association of Consumer Advocates and the UC Berkeley Center for Consumer Law & Economic Justice

The recent surge in interest in consumer law among students has so far found only sporadic response in law schools. Indeed, most of the nation's law schools still don't have a single class in Consumer Law. A new generation of law students interested in vindicating the rights of consumers and promoting economic justice eagerly await an opportunity to leave their mark – but many of them will have to wait to leave law school to begin building their careers as consumer advocates.

We are not aware of any other nationwide network of law school student organizations dedicated to the promotion of consumer law.

The **Consumer Law Advocates, Students, and Scholars (CLASS) network** is changing that.

The CLASS network was formed in 2018 as a joint project of the National Association of Consumer Advocates (NACA) and the UC Berkeley Center for Consumer Law & Economic Justice and Berkeley's Consumer Advocacy and Protection Society (CAPS). The CLASS network's goal is to bring consumer law to law school campuses and shape the next generation of consumer advocates.

Independent, self-run student groups make up the foundation of the CLASS network. Through participation in CLASS, law students can learn about consumer legal issues that affect millions; meet and exchange ideas with likeminded students, professors, and attorneys across the country; take direct action to influence policy; and explore new potential career paths. Neither NACA nor the Berkeley Center maintain any direct control over CLASS network student groups and their internal policies.

Project Sponsors

The National Association of Consumer Advocates (NACA) is a nonprofit association of attorneys and consumer advocates committed to representing consumers' interests. Our members are private and public sector attorneys, legal services attorneys, law professors, and law students whose primary focus is the protection and representation of consumers. They represent consumers victimized by fraudulent, abusive, and predatory business practices. As a national organization fully committed to promoting justice for consumers, NACA's members and their clients are actively engaged in promoting a fair and open marketplace that forcefully protects the rights of consumers, particularly those of modest means. NACA also has a charitable and educational fund incorporated under §501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

The UC Berkeley Center for Consumer Law & Economic Justice works to establish fair and equal access to a marketplace free from fraud and predation. Through research, advocacy, and teaching, the Center seeks to move closer to a society where economic security and opportunity are available to all. Committed to advancing the field of consumer law – the vast complex of rules shaping the goods and services we purchase, rent and borrow, and the information we provide and use – the Center fosters the development of innovative scholarship, curriculum and community. The Center offers a wide variety of courses; provides students with opportunities for

hands-on research and advocacy; and supports students in bringing their perspectives and benefits to the field

The Consumer Advocacy and Protection Society (CAPS) is a student-run Berkeley Law organization dedicated to the promotion of consumer law and consumer protection. CAPS promotes student interest in consumer law by hosting consumer-related programming, and has also proposed and helped introduce new consumer law courses into the Berkeley Law curriculum. Outside of the classroom, CAPS members have submitted public comments to various federal regulatory agencies, and have drafted and filed amicus briefs in important consumer law cases across the country, including in the United States Supreme Court, the California Supreme Court, and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Consumers benefit from strong consumer protections, unfettered access to the courts, and high-quality representation. To continue to foster and promote advocacy of this kind, NACA, the Berkeley Center and CAPS are eager to connect with law students, law professors and law school administrations. We are dedicated to supporting the establishment of student chapters in law schools around the country to build awareness and foster an interest in consumer law and policy among law students.

Starting and Maintaining a Group

If your school does not have a Consumer Law group yet, check your school administration's guidelines for starting new student organizations. Here are some general suggestions and tips on how to set your group up and run it effectively. If your school has an existing Consumer Law group, contact NACA at community@consumeradvocates.org for further information on how to join the CLASS network and the benefits it can provide.

Recruiting potential members: Think about your networks at your school and how you can reach out through them to identify possible members. Student listservs, class social media groups, clinics, and other student organizations can be avenues to start looking for members. Make sure you are following school rules when pursuing any possible leads.

- After identifying ways to communicate with potential members, it may be necessary to explain what consumer law is depending on how your school treats the subject. In order to help fellow students understand what consumer law is and the purposes of a consumer law student group, it is helpful to talk in terms of economic justice, civil justice, and public interest lawyering. Consider building your talking points around generally understood issues like lending discrimination, debt collection abuses, privacy violations, and more. Think about what consumer-related issues have been discussed at your school and what students have shown interest in.
- Once established, make sure your group is involved in any organization fairs for new students. Because students are more likely to be able to take on leadership roles in newer, smaller organizations, this could be an additional selling point to potential members.
- **Finding a faculty advisor:** Most law schools require student organizations to have a faculty advisor. If your school has a consumer law course or a related course such as Bankruptcy, the professor teaching these courses may be a good faculty-advisor candidate. Clinical professors are also possible advisors. If you are having trouble

finding a faculty advisor, contact NACA or the Berkeley Center for help to locate possible candidates connected with your school.

- **Writing a constitution:** A sample constitution and mission statement are available for students to use when drafting their constitutions and bylaws. Additionally, CAPS and other CLASS network members have provided their constitutions for reference. Be sure to consider your school's requirements when preparing your constitution. After your group has been formally established, send your constitution to NACA for our records and to serve as a resource for future groups.
- **Accessing funding:** Student organizations are typically eligible for funding from their school and are required to submit budget proposals even before they have been officially formed. If you have not held a leadership position in a student organization before, it is helpful to reach out to student leaders to determine what a reasonable budget looks like.
 - o Some schools will allow student organizations to raise funds from outside sources. If you are interested in doing so once your group has been established, consult your school's guidelines to learn what is permissible. Law firms and other organizations can be sources of funding and sponsorship.
 - o Any funding your group receives should be held in the approved accounts your school provides for you. Student groups are prohibited from opening any accounts in NACA's name.
- **Programming:** We encourage potential CLASS network members to start thinking about events and programming early. Having a solid vision of what you want your group to do can make it easier for your group to be officially approved and can help you come up with a concrete budget. Possible event ideas include career panels with local consumer attorneys, know-your-rights community workshops, and presentations by professors or other attorneys on hot-topic consumer issues. We may be able to help you get in touch with consumer attorneys and other advocates in your community. We also encourage students to:
 - o Use a sign-in sheet at all of your group's events to collect the names and email addresses of attendees. This list can be a resource to help with recruitment and to gauge interest in your group.
 - o Hold an introductory meeting every year. This is an opportunity to introduce new students to the group and get member input on the group's direction. If possible, groups should also try to hold a separate informal social event for members and prospective members at the beginning of the year.
 - o Look for ways to partner with other student organizations on events. Because consumer law affects so many people and touches on so many aspects of modern life, there are many intersectional topics that are ripe for discussion.
- **Advocacy activities:** We encourage students to get involved in advocating for pro-consumer policies. The federal government as well as your state government often consider consumer-related proposals that you can help influence. CLASS network members should consider writing to and meeting with their legislators, submitting comments to agencies, writing amicus briefs, and other activities to engage with consumer policy.
 - o We discourage student groups from engaging in political activity in their official capacity. This includes campaigning, fundraising, endorsing, and making contributions. Using NACA's name for any political activity is strictly prohibited.

- **Other activities:** Depending on your school's policies and practices, your group may be able to engage in activities like providing direct legal help to members of the community or working on outside research projects. Doing so can help your members gain clinical experience and possibly earn pro bono hours. Consult your school's pro bono guidelines and rules for partnering with in-school clinics or outside organizations.

Connecting with the CLASS network

NACA, the Berkeley Center, and the rest of the CLASS network are dedicated to providing student groups the support they need whether they are still trying to get official approval or have already existed for several years. Students can turn to NACA and the Berkeley Center to provide administrative support, suggest speakers, facilitate connections with attorneys and professors, and promote chapter programming wherever possible.

We hold monthly conference calls for CLASS network members where students, professors, and attorneys can share ideas for student groups and discuss the challenges they are facing. Additionally, we maintain a Google Group through which CLASS participants can reach each other. If you are interested in joining the Google Group and the calls, please contact NACA at community@consumeradvocates.org.

Students are also welcome to join NACA as student members. NACA student members receive discounted access to NACA's educational products, access to members-only sections of NACA's website, and access to a NACA student listserv. NACA student membership is priced at \$25 annually and is open to all law students. You can contact NACA to learn more about student membership and how register.