

Defining The Culture For A Legal Nonprofit

By **Stéphane Bonifassi, Lincoln Caylor and Elizabeth Ortega** (July 29, 2025)

In this Law360 Expert Analysis series, legal professionals who have founded industry-related nonprofits discuss how to overcome the biggest challenges to getting started, and how to balance the launch and management of an organization along with the demands of their primary work. If you have a nonprofit experience you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

The International Academy of Financial Crime Litigators was founded on a clear, compelling idea: Bring together leading trial lawyers, litigation experts, and academics to exchange insights and drive meaningful change.

Through open debate and global collaboration, we publish widely and foster a fellowship of thought leaders. Known as The Academy or #TheAcademyBrass, a term coined by one of our fellows, our work lives by the tagline "Where theory meets practice."

The Biggest Challenges

Elizabeth Ortega: Our first challenge was to accept that the type of unicorn organization we wanted didn't exist, and the second challenge was to embrace the opportunity. If we wanted it, we had to create it.

We began by looking at the existing landscape. What we saw was an untapped community, united by interest but not yet connected. It was fertile ground to cultivate new relationships.

The international marketplace was hungry for real skill enhancement and genuine opportunities for expressing thought leadership — hunger that no single existing group was satisfying. Sure, there was plenty of business networking. But where were the calls for action, backed by hard-won experience and solid research?

We envisioned our fellowship becoming an authentic voice, responding to current legal issues of significance to economic crime litigation. Heady stuff.

So, we rolled up our sleeves and became grassroots organizers. We pulled out our overstuffed Rolodexes — yes, the physical ones gathering dust and the digital ones — and started making calls. We reached out to doers: the absolute top-tier white collar defense lawyers, government prosecutors and asset recovery experts we knew or admired from afar.

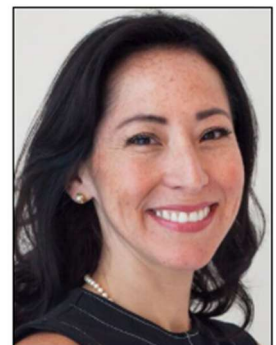
We called professors whose cutting-edge work we followed. We also made cold calls and asked for meetings. We were rebuffed and ignored, but we had more successes than failures, and we persevered. The key to success was responding fearlessly to the market realities.



Stéphane Bonifassi



Lincoln Caylor



Elizabeth Ortega

The Academy never would have been launched if we had looked around and said, "This hasn't been done before, so what makes us think we can do it?" We knew there was a demand for it, but no template for success. We had an idea, created and mapped out a plan and went out and pitched it. We believed in our golden idea, focused on the yeses and ignored the nos.

I also chanted, to Stéphane's dismay, "We are the champions, my friends. And we'll keep on fighting 'til the end." I'm most creative when I engage all my senses, and annoying my co-founders at the same time is a plus.

Stéphane Bonifassi: Every grassroots nonprofit is all about making the ask. This was another challenge that we faced early on. The key was to find kindred spirits who would entertain our enormous request: Would you join us in a partnership requiring academics to cede some intellectual territory to practitioners, and vice versa?

From the start, Mark Pieth — the emeritus professor of criminal law at the University of Basel and founder of the Basel Institute on Governance — understood the nuances and signed on as an ally with a shared mission of working to resolve economic crimes through judicial practices, research and collaboration. His enthusiasm set the tone for those who would follow.

We also credit an integral part of The Academy's success to the late Gretta Fenner. She was the managing director of the Basel Institute on Governance, and an anti-corruption and public governance champion.

In addition to finding partners who championed our mission, we also learned the importance of being creative while holding onto your ideas lightly. The Academy can be a great creative outlet. We explore and challenge long-held ideas, and remain open to responding nimbly to new developments, which may mean letting go of some ideas.

However, we make sure our foundational principles are held firmly. And, we willingly embrace the responsibilities that come with leadership in being flexible while keeping ourselves grounded in our founding values.

Lincoln Caylor: Given The Academy's mission, from the start, we had to figure out how to encourage both competition and collaboration. We achieved this by defining our culture and who we admit as fellows. We are up front in the admission process about what we expect and the type of collaboration that we intend to foster. Fellows would not have achieved their professional success without innate competitiveness.

However, a characteristic of the fellowship is understanding that there is more to learn, and many smart and experienced people to learn from. We strive to have those people in the room. Collaboration, vigorous debate and sharing are our competitive edge.

Along the way, we've also learned why it's important to continually step outside your comfort zone. The status quo can be a cozy and limiting trap. It's important to reexamine accepted wisdom periodically.

Every August, we organize one-on-one talks with fellows. We draft talking points and discuss areas of growth, opportunities and gaps in the nonprofit's operations. We go to the membership and ask: How are we doing? How can we improve?

The answers help us adjust and continue our growth and success.

Finding Balance

Caylor: When it comes to the discipline of managing our time running The Academy, most of our effort is devoted to vetting potential fellows. We have prioritized this and it is our focus.

Maintaining a high bar for admission to fellowship is a foundational principle — we want the right people in the room. We have gotten into a rhythm of meetings and established work streams that work for us.

At the end of every call, we confirm and schedule the next call, make clear what each of us have taken on as action items, and make sure we have an agenda to keep us focused. We keep the calls to an hour. Working as a group of three, to keep things moving, we can juggle schedules so that two people can meet when one gets tied up.

Bonifassi: We have the Basel Institute on Governance manage our back-office to take some work off our plates, and fellows participate and support many of the other tasks to keep us up and running. We emphasize that fellows are to be active in the fellowship, and they all contribute in different ways to continue our success.

Ortega: Of course, all of this is exhilarating, different, challenging, fun and stressful, and we wouldn't want it any other way. That makes any issues of "balance" worth it. All it takes is one of us to remind the group that, "Heh, we started something." And that is pretty cool.

Stéphane Bonifassi is a lawyer at Bonifassi Avocats, Lincoln Caylor is a partner at Bennett Jones LLP and Elizabeth Ortega is the principal of ECO Strategic Communications. Together they co-founded The International Academy of Financial Crime Litigators.

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