Retention rates among minority law students historically have been lower than those of their peers.

Since opening its doors in 1899, the John Marshall Law School in Chicago has had a reputation for welcoming students based on aptitude and a willingness to learn—not on income, race or class, yet students and faculty have noticed higher numbers of Latinos being dismissed from the law school than other ethnicities.

During her first year in law school, Daissy Domínguez, now president of John Marshall’s Latino Law Students Association (LLSA), saw some of her classmates at John Marshall whom she describes as “smart, hardworking individuals” being dismissed from the law school.

“I knew they were capable of doing well in law school, and they were studying every day but just needed more assistance,” Domínguez said. She decided she would be the catalyst for change, and she led the drive for an Academic Enhancement Program (AEP) at John Marshall. Members of the faculty and administration also recognized a need for this helping-hand program.

“It is not unusual for minority and nontraditional students to have more challenges,” said Rory Smith, associate dean for outreach and planning. “Groups of students that have negative stereotypes are also challenged by what is known as a ‘stereotype threat,’ which manifests in test anxiety, discomfort in speaking up, diminished self-confidence and becoming withdraw and disconnected. One of the intended outcomes of AEP is to break through these challenges.”

Professor Rogelio A. Lasso, a faculty advisor, saw the negative stereotype occurring among John Marshall’s minority students and discussed with Smith the idea of an academic assistance program. Spurred by Domínguez, Lasso and Smith agreed AEP would be run with students providing rigorous academic support and mentorship, in a welcoming atmosphere. AEP also encourages students to be active in extracurricular activities.

“AEP is intended to be a safe environment where students don’t face this stereotype threat,” Smith said.

“Success of the student depends on how they develop analytical skills,” Lasso said, “but there is no reason why [dismissal from John Marshall] should happen.” Lasso believes analytical skills, critical to graduation rates and success on the bar exam, are skills learned and improved upon.

The groundwork for AEP was Domínguez’s initial step: organize first-year study groups for finals among LLSA members. Her initiative caught Lasso’s attention. Together they set out designing and implementing the retention program that would benefit LLSA membership, bringing Smith into the discussion.

Domínguez, under Lasso’s tutelage, came up with the winning formula for the Academic Enhancement Program. AEP works through study groups that are divided by how far along each student is in his or her studies. Each group is led by a second-year or third-year instructor who leads weekly lectures and assessment sessions. Toward the end of each semester, AEP holds additional workshops on exam-taking tips. Students also learn to develop study habits and concepts they will continue to use in their legal careers.

“The students were very grateful for the support that was provided by their peers,” Domínguez said.

And the program operates under a strict attendance policy. “We are not going to let you slack,” Lasso said. “We decided anyone who skipped would be out of the program.”

The program’s success inspired LLSA to expand the program to members of John Marshall’s Black Law Students Association and Middle Eastern Law Students Association. All students enrolled in the program have seen improvements in their grades, “and a dramatic change in their self-confidence,” Lasso added.

Student involvement in AEP encouraged more participation within the three student organizations and honors programs. A number of students have received scholarships and academic awards.

“The program has not only encouraged academic excellence but has encouraged first-year students to give back to our organizations.” Many, she said, are “eager to run for executive board positions,” Domínguez said.

Chris Cardona, one of the first-year students in AEP last year, remembers law school advisors stressing the importance of staying organized and studying outside of class, “but for me, who has never had that kind of discipline, saying and doing are very different things.” The AEP offered Cardona a forum where he could review material with a small group of classmates, in an organized and structured way. It also made Cardona and students like him comfortable asking for clarification on difficult topics.

“The second-year and third-year students provided us with a better understanding of the topics we were learning in the classroom, but they also gave us insight into what we needed to know outside the classroom,” Cardona said.

Through AEP, Cardona befriended a number of students in his section, and he increased his commitment to LLSA.

By regularly attending LLSA meetings, he learned about various programs, including a judges luncheon and the end-of-the-year fiesta hosted by LLSA. Cardona stepped into a leadership position on LLSA’s executive board, and is serving as academic chair.

In April 2012, LLSA received the 2012 Overall Outstanding Student Organization and Outstanding Minority Student Organization awards from the Student Bar Association, in part because of its success in establishing AEP. The awards were given at the law school’s annual spring party.

Domínguez, now in her third and final year of law school, spent her 2012 summer expanding the Academic Enhancement Program. “The current structure has proven to be very effective, but there is always room for improvement!”