real transparency: what’s behind the numbers?

While the overall job climate for recent law school graduates has not changed significantly over the past several years, job placement rates of individual law schools have become increasingly important to students and schools alike. Recognizing the need to make significant changes in a soft legal market, the Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law at Arizona State University continually reexamines its career services operation in an effort to better serve its students and graduates. Through a series of transformative efforts, the College of Law has made substantial strides in better serving both students and graduates with their career development. Data collected this spring by the ABA on all ABA accredited law schools reveals that ASU Law is #19 in the nation (and #5 among public law schools) for successful postgraduate job placement in real lawyer jobs.

How is ASU Law getting its graduates placed when the market nationally remains sluggish?

Different Choices in a Down Economy

As we all remember, in 2008 the economy was hit hard, and graduates in all fields were faced with what analysts deemed a bleak job market. Undaunted, the College of Law seized this challenge as an opportunity for growth and transformation. **While many law schools have made cuts in response to economic challenges, the College of Law chose to invest in and revamp their career services team and efforts.** As part of this restructure, the scope of the office’s work increased and the Career Strategy and Professional Development Mentoring Center was born. The Career Center counseling staff grew, building a team whose mission is to proactively and creatively assist students and graduates in their job searches in an ever changing and highly competitive market. The result was dramatic. Increasing the staff allowed the office to wholly invest in students’ development and career goals. Counselors were free to provide more significant one-on-one attention to students. Active rather than passive, proactive rather than reactive—that is the ASU Law mantra.

Not only did the Center’s staff expand, but in only one year, the number of workshops, programs, and **networking opportunities offered through the Career Center** doubled. The Career Center developed new programs on subjects such as networking tips and interview practices and designed informational sessions regarding untapped placement opportunities and non-traditional markets. Students had access to dozens of exciting new opportunities on a monthly basis. One of the more successful events was “Speed Networking”, during which the students had the chance to meet one-on-one with numerous attorneys from various practice areas and firms. The Career Center honed its focus on sponsoring events that stressed quality over quantity, providing the space, time, and access to forge real connections and build personal relationships between current attorneys and law students.

Most surprising, however, is that these efforts to boost the impact of the Career Center and engage students in new and exciting opportunities were not a one-time...
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feat. Rather, the size of the staff and the number of programs/events has not simply remained constant over the last six years, but has experienced further growth and continual refinement. Events like Small Firm Week and the Government and Public Interest Career Month help expose students to new job opportunities and help students to understand what will make them more marketable. The students gain invaluable insights, helping them to better define their choices during their law school careers.

The Path of Innovation Continues - Growing Employer Relationships

While the College of Law’s upward trajectory and the Career Center’s progress was well worth celebrating, there was still work to be done. The next step was to broaden employer and student relationships. Three years ago, the Career Center named a Director of Employer Relations and set course to build stronger ties between employers and the College of Law, to expand the range of jobs available to law graduates, and to develop programs that more easily connected employers to students and graduates.

Programs like the On Campus Interview (OCI) program, which has a tradition of successfully placing students with large firms and corporations, were (and still are) important, but they failed to address the fact that more than 60% of law school graduates are employed by small and mid-sized firms. Increasing access to smaller and mid-size firms, while maintaining successful links to large firms and corporations through programs like OCI, became an essential part of fostering a strong and diverse legal community. The College of Law again deviated from the traditional path, and looked to another section of the legal community—small and mid-sized firms, boutique firms, and firms that exclusively practice in niche areas of the law.

Developing new and innovative programs to meet these needs often took the form of smaller, networking-focused events and employment “fairs”, where firms, companies, and agencies were invited to meet students, who would then build on these relationships. Many new Career Center favorites quickly followed, including “Dine-a-Round” events that allowed small groups of students to interact with a local practitioner in a particular practice area over lunch. The focus on cultivating relationships between law students and firms of all sizes prompted the creation of additional year-round programs like “STEP”, an ASU initiative to provide law firms with students and graduates to take on project and contract work.

Beyond creating new ways to bring employers to students, the College of Law worked to truly understand and listen to what potential employers needed from law school graduates. Recognizing that access was but one piece of the equation, the College coupled student access to employers with continuing and developing programs that would enable students to be as “practice ready” as possible upon graduation.
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Once again, the College of Law focused on growth and expansion of opportunities for students. Real skills-building courses such as clinics and externships expanded during a time when many law schools were making cuts. The synergy between the growth of experiential learning opportunities and the Career Center’s mission transformed the focus of traditional job placement to reflect a more holistic view. The result not only provides access for students to potential employers, but ensures that those students are more impressive applicants when they compete for jobs.

Central to a growing relationship with potential employers was discovering and appreciating new types of jobs that did not necessarily require bar passage or licensure. Recognizing the full value of these JD Advantage, quasi-legal, or “alternative” careers is essential and has expanded opportunities in the current legal job market. Embracing these opportunities creates a boundless and exciting world of careers, unlimited by jurisdictional requirements, bar passage, and licensure, affording students the unique ability to seek experiences many of their peers would envy.

The College of Law continues to operate on the cutting-edge and to integrate creative ways to help students and graduates find professional success. To better serve recent graduates, ASU Law boasts its most innovative change yet…

Recharging Graduates’ Job Search - Enter the “Head Hunter”

Recent graduates are often met with a difficult few months following the high point of graduation. Spending countless hours studying for the bar exam and then several more months anxiously waiting to learn if they passed is made all the more difficult when that graduate has not landed “the” job just yet. The College of Law recognized a need for additional support and again transformed the challenge into an opportunity to provide graduates one-of-a-kind assistance by taking a cue from the private sector.

Approximately a year and a half ago the College of Law brought in-house its own legal recruiter. Rather than merely plugging a recruiter into a traditional counselor role, the College of Law capitalized on the true skills and networks of a professional recruiter. Like a matchmaker, the placement director works to strike the delicate balance between the needs and wants of both graduates and employers. In order to accomplish this task the Director focuses solely on recent graduates and alumni. This allows her the ability to match graduates’ personal interests and particular strengths with appropriate employers who are looking for a great “fit”.

At ASU when a graduate seeks employment assistance they are met with genuine enthusiasm, confidence in their abilities to be a successful lawyer, and a drive to help them get where they want to go. The College of Law’s placement director takes the time to explore career possibilities with each individual and builds trust and excitement.
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along the way. Graduates leave with a sense of hope, knowing that they have an advocate in their corner. It is this energy and enthusiasm, the hallmark of the Career Center, that cannot be duplicated and results in successful placement of graduates in jobs that they enjoy. The ABA statistics for the 2013 class prove the success of this approach.

The Next Steps

The upcoming move to downtown Phoenix will position the College of Law to further increase placement opportunities and take advantage of proximity to the legal community and Arizona’s judicial and political center. Additionally, the ground-breaking ASU Alumni Law Group continues to grow and provide exciting and valuable employment opportunities for graduates. As ASU strives to further strengthen its position as the place for the legal community to find resources and support, its students and graduates will only continue to benefit.

“While we at ASU Law are gratified that our efforts to find our graduates exciting and fulfilling work have yielded such positive results, we are committed to the success of all our graduates. So long as there are still graduates who are unemployed or underemployed, we have more work to do. We will continue to transform and adapt, looking for every opportunity to ensure the success of our students and alumni.”