The Office of Career Services helps alumni and students build more satisfying careers

Career Projection

Here's some breaking news: new associates do not always find the practice of law to be a completely satisfying occupation. The National Association for Law Placement reports that more than half of all new associates leave their firms within four years, 38 percent leave within three years, 23 percent depart within two years, and 8 percent are gone before they have even reached their first anniversary.

The Law School's Herbert B. Fried Office of Career Services (OCS) continues to expand and improve the services it offers to help today's students avoid becoming tomorrow's attrition statistics, and to assist alumni who are changing jobs or thinking about doing so.

Led by Assistant Dean Diane Downs, the OCS team has developed a superb information infrastructure, a multifaceted staff, helpful programs, and plenty of published materials to back up that commitment. Downs says, "Good planning can make a big difference in job satisfaction. We are ready, willing, and able to help everyone, from prospective students to seasoned alumni, with the information and advice they need, to have the careers they want."

Associate Director Paul Woo has spearheaded the creation and installation of a proprietary career services database that enables OCS to post job openings on the Law School's Web site as soon as they are received. "Paul started working on this before there were even any commercial products available," Downs says, "and he has done such great work that we still have the superior product." Alumni can access job listings online by acquiring a password from OCS (see sidebar), or they can receive them in the mail by signing up for the office's monthly newsletter.

Career planning is of course a highly individualized process, and Downs says she and the OCS team spend as much as half their time in conversation with members of the Law School community, providing one-on-one guidance by phone or in person on everything from sprucing up a résumé to brainstorming about alternative practice areas (or alternative careers). OCS also offers workshops to develop skills in interviewing, résumé preparation, and other crucial career-planning and job-search capabilities. Its popular networking and mentoring programs provide contacts for strategizing and support.

The better to match its advice to its clients' interests, OCS is staffed with experts in different facets of law practice. The most recent addition to the office, Associate Director Elizabeth Sheil Fenner, worked for eight years as an associate in a large law firm and as assistant counsel to a major corporation. A Vanderbilt Law alumna, Fenner says, "I think my experience practicing law has helped me understand the concerns of people I talk with and has also helped in weighing options and alternatives."

Downs, whose law degree is from Harvard, counsels students and alumni principally in the areas of public service and government opportunities. As the Law School's representative to the Public Service Law Network and to the National Association of Law Placement's public service committee, she aims to raise the profile of University of Chicago students and alumni who participate in public service. Downs also administers the James C. Hormel
Loan Deferment/Forgiveness Program, now in its fifteenth year, which is constantly being examined and improved.

Jennifer Sacon, a University of Pennsylvania J.D., oversees the office's mentoring programs and coordinates the clerkship application process. Since one-fourth of the members of each graduating class begin their careers with a judicial clerkship, Sacon's help in navigating that complex application process is critical. This year, five graduates are clerking at the Supreme Court, 32 in federal circuit courts, 12 in federal district courts, and three in state supreme courts.

Alumni and students considering careers in teaching are referred to Professor Lisa Bernstein, the Law School's academic career advisor.

This year, OCS extended its direct outreach and networking activities for alumni with breakfast presentations in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco. More cities are on the itinerary for next year. OCS also works closely with the Law School's Office of Alumni Affairs to make connections among alumni with similar interests. Downs says that the University's new Alumni Careers Network (which can be accessed online from the "Career Services" section of the Law School's Web site by clicking on "Services to Alumni") provides another way to locate a mentor or become one for another alum.

"Becoming a mentor or helping out with networking are two great ways for graduates to give something back to the Law School," Downs says, adding that alumni can also make a much-appreciated contribution by agreeing to give a presentation at the Law School. Between 20 and 30 such presentations are made each year, on topics that range from enlightening discussions of particular practice areas to specific advice on career-building skills.

Of course, much of the office's activity still focuses on helping students secure great jobs. Woo coordinates an on-campus interviewing program that is stronger than ever—last year, over 250 students participated in more than 6,000 interviews with 325 employers from 28 states and three countries. During interviewing season, the office offers to review any student's résumé, and last year nearly 175 students took them up on that offer. Woo has also led a process of helping students begin thinking about their career options earlier in their law school days, even working with the Admissions Office to introduce prospective students to career paths and trends in the field of law.

"In most ways," Downs says, "Chicago students and alumni are anything but average or typical. But I think the national trends in associate attrition are probably generally reflective of our own graduates' experience. The more we can do to help everyone navigate those career changes and make great, satisfying choices, the happier we will be."

The Office of Career Services can help you with:
- Career counseling
- Information about job openings
- Skill training
- Networking and mentoring
- Loan deferral or forgiveness for public-service careers

For assistance or further information, contact OCS by phone at (773) 702-9625, by fax at (773) 702-3154, or by email at career_services@law.uchicago.edu.

You can find additional information, plus handbooks on résumé preparation and cover-letter writing, at the "Career Services" section of the Law School's Web site: http://www.law.uchicago.edu/careerscvs/index.html.