

# Using The Official Guide to Legal Specialties as a Counseling Tool

by Karen Comstock

I was thrilled when NALP published *The Official Guide to Legal Specialties, An Insider's Guide to Every Major Practice Area* in 2000. With eleven years of law school career counseling under my belt at that point, I still felt frustrated that I had not yet discovered a ready tool to help provide law students with succinct and relevant information about what the various jobs of practicing law actually entail on a day-to-day basis. Sure, I had gathered my own, incomplete store of information in my head as a result of organizing and attending dozens of career path programs over the years, but not only are my retrieval systems flawed (i.e., my memory is not what it used to be), but it is supremely inefficient to rely on relaying this information verbally in counseling appointments. Our career office library contained an uneven assortment of resources that covered some practice areas, but nothing that I had come across had yet to serve the function that I felt was needed. I thought, "Somebody should write a textbook!"

And somebody did! Lisa Abrams has done a fine job of creating a coherent, thorough, and accessible reference book that gives law students exactly the information they need to know in the first stages of figuring out what kind of lawyer they want to be. After reading the *Guide*, I found myself wishing that every law student had his or her own copy and was required to read it during the first semester of law school. While I don't have the power to give homework assignments, I was able to quickly persuade my colleagues here at Cornell that it would be a useful expenditure of resources to purchase a copy of the *Guide* for every first-year student and give it to them, along with our own Career Planning and Placement Manual, at our September 1L orientation program. This orientation program is designed to

introduce the 1Ls to the career office staff, briefly explain the November 1 first-year counseling rule, and lay out the year's 1L "curriculum" that we have in place for them. While 1Ls are typically relieved to learn both that we have a plan for them and that they don't have to worry at all about their job search in the beginning of their first semester, many are eager to begin learning about their options.

Our hope was that providing 1Ls with their own copy of *The Official Guide to Legal Specialties* as they enter law school would illustrate several points, including: (1) There are a wide range of law career options; (2) The career office places no value judgment on students' career choices; (3) The first step in finding a job is self-education; (4) Finding a job is not just about responding to what might be available; and (5) The school is willing to spend money to assist with students' career planning processes.

Has the experiment worked? We think so. While it is impossible to expect that every student will read the *Guide* cover to cover, many are using it as a reference tool to some degree. The first time a student came to a counseling appointment with the *Guide* in hand and a finger marking a relevant chapter for us to discuss, I felt like great progress had been made. An informal survey of my colleagues and a sampling of students elicited the following remarks:

- "I suggested to a student interested in entertainment law that she read the relevant chapter in the *Guide*. She did and came back in to say, 'I didn't realize that was what this field was about!'"

- “The *Guide* is helpful for students when it comes to preparing for the second-year interview process. It helps to clarify practice areas to pursue and provides the vocabulary to discuss a variety of practice areas with a range of interviewers.”
- “I think it is great that you provided this book to all of us. I came to law school fairly sure of the area in which I wanted to concentrate. Reading the *Guide* helped to reinforce what I already knew. My friends have used the book to read about practice areas they thought they might be interested in.”

We plan to purchase a copy of *The Official Guide to Legal Specialties* for each member of the first-year class again next year, and to find more ways to integrate its use in our counseling and programming efforts.

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