

A Teaching Moment

by Heather Frattone, LeaNora Ruffin, and Jo-Ann Verrier

We hear the stories and feel that sense of “ouch” — our student has failed to respond to a firm’s invitation to a call-back interview. Or, once at the firm, she has r.s.v.p.’ed to an event at the home of the managing partner and then not showed up. Or there’s the student who did not open his mail for six months and then wanted to know if the call-back offer he received in the mail was still open. With such blatant examples of unprofessional behavior, career development offices must take every opportunity to drive home business etiquette and professionalism principles. This article will suggest that NALP’s new 45-day Timing Guideline for offers provides an excellent teaching moment.

Now, to be fair, lest we fall in the trap of stereotyping an entire generation, we acknowledge that law students blunder in these ways not out of arrogance or malice but out of a paucity of experience with the norms of their new surroundings. Some of our students, perhaps many, come to their law school employment situations with very different experiences of work. They may never have held a full-time job, for instance, even though they’ve traveled the globe. They may have been so highly sought after in their prior positions that they have — through no fault of their own — an exaggerated sense of their value in their new position. They may be accustomed to an academic environment in which they’ve had success after success, leaving them without experience of the hard knocks that are likely to befall them in a work environment.

Nevertheless, none of these reasons absolve us of our responsibility as law school career development professionals to educate students about the standards of their chosen profession, about how their values fit in to that profession, and about how

their actions and choices have real repercussions on those with and for whom they are working. For example, we are not in the business of changing the value system of the student who feels it is more important to share lunch with friends than the hiring partner on one particular day, but we want to arm that student with the professional knowledge to say, “Tuesday isn’t a great day for me, but I’d very much like to join you for lunch. Would Wednesday or Thursday work for you?” Or, better yet, help students develop an instinct that immediately enables them to recognize opportunity and prioritize lunch with the hiring partner above a lunch with friends that, arguably, could be more easily rescheduled. And, quite frankly, a rule that allowed some students more than 100 days to make decisions about job offers did not assist law schools in meeting that responsibility. Let’s face it. Did your dean, or your hiring partner, offer you four months to decide whether or not to take your job? Never again will our students be faced with a window as wide as those provided by NALP’s former Timing Guidelines.

The new guidelines, in effect for the upcoming recruiting season, allow us to speak with students about their responsibilities in the job market in a new and concrete way. Clearly, the 45-day window is still very generous and will not match up with students’ experiences at any other time in their job searches. (Can you imagine a federal judge saying, “Sure, let me know in 45 days...”) Nonetheless, the change in the Timing Guidelines creates a teaching opportunity for career services offices, allowing us to open up discussions about students’ responsibilities in the recruiting process.

These responsibilities begin far earlier than the actual time of responding to offers. One effect of the new Timing Guidelines is that students will bene-

fit by thinking strategically about their choices at the beginning of their employer research. Because they will be receiving offers — and those offers will be expiring — at different times, it is in their best interests to be as informed about opportunities as possible from the start of the recruiting process. As career development offices, we need to equip students with the research and evaluation skills necessary to understand the job market, and the students' place in the job market, from the beginning of the process so that they can make careful scheduling decisions and, ultimately, the best decisions about matches with employers.

The new timeframe also requires that students be responsible in a new way on an administrative level. Managing the staggered set of response dates from various employers will provide students with early training on how best to balance the multiple project deadlines they will encounter in the workplace. This task will require students to develop macro and micro skills: they will need to be well-informed and strategic about their choices, and they will also need to have tight organizational systems that will allow them to manage their schedules. This combination of analytical, strategic, “big-picture” skills and detail-oriented, pragmatic, administrative skills is one that will serve them well in their roles as lawyers.

Lastly, as we explain the benefits of the new guidelines and their potential to help employers better manage their yield, we have the opportunity to remind students that job offers do not exist in a bubble but are part of a larger business plan. Armed with this understanding, students may face their job search with a more realistic perspective, recognizing that each offer is a delicate balance of the evaluation of talent against the employer's economic reality.

Law school career development offices are part and parcel of the educational mission of today's law school. Career development professionals are called upon not only to instruct students in how to create a role for themselves in our profession, but also to impart to students the skills necessary to successfully navigate their own professional paths. Regardless of where our students begin their careers, we know that many will change directions a number of times throughout their careers. It is our responsibility to teach them the skills they will need to develop and accomplish their career goals and negotiate each transition. We need to help them learn how to better understand who they are, the skills they have to offer, and what they hope to gain from a particular position. The new Timing Guidelines will help us achieve this goal as we use them to teach students how to better understand the strategies involved in making a good career decision and becoming a true professional.

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.Note: The full text of the new Timing Guidelines (Part V of the NALP Principles & Standards) as well as suggested Interpretations can be found at www.nalp.org by clicking on the Principles & Standards link.