

QUICK TIPS:

Alumni Counseling Basics for Law School Career Counselors

by Julie Anna Alvarez

Counseling alumni can seem downright daunting for a counselor new to the task. With alumni, there is little predictability as to whether you will be asked to advise a jobless newly minted grad, a mid-career lawyer unhappy in a practice area, or a seasoned alum who has been laid off—possibly all during the course of one day! Each appointment presents individual circumstances. Alumni are also more likely to question your capacity to offer authoritative advice. What is a counselor to do? Here are tips to assist you in building credibility and counseling alumni more effectively.

Prepare: Try to learn the alum’s reason for seeking counseling (try a short pre-appointment survey) and get a résumé (if available) in advance so you can prepare before you meet. Stay abreast of practice areas, common alternative careers, resources, and networking opportunities to be of maximum assistance. Some resources you rely on for students are also helpful to alumni. Good job search practices and strategies (e.g., informational interviewing) also translate well. Familiarize yourself with how alumni résumé formats should differ from student résumés (noting bar admissions, order of headings, etc.) and which job search resources may not be available to alumni.

Listen: Successful counseling hinges on listening to get a complete grasp of the situation. With alumni, it is important to build trust through listening. They are anxious about their current career situations and a host of issues related to family, financial burdens, and doubts about how any career

move may affect their sense of identity. The adage “people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” applies here. Ask questions, but do not interrupt prematurely. Allow the alum to feel “heard” and understood.

Evaluate: Keep in mind that the alum may not have engaged in a job search recently and may not know where to begin. Assess his or her job search starting point so that you are on the same page and not communicating in overly simplistic or advanced terms. Establish from the beginning the current work status, prospects, and the level of urgency underpinning the search.

Bridge: Alumni like anecdotes that let them know they are not alone. It often helps to share a pertinent, transferrable experience you have had in your own career search or life generally. Share that you have counseled someone facing a similar situation, if you have done so.

Admit What You Do Not Know: It is impossible to know *everything*. To maintain credibility and counsel appropriately, sometimes you need to admit you do not have all the answers and instead offer to partner with the alum to search for answers. Consider engaging jointly in an informational interview with someone you identify as a resource. Alternatively, promise to get back to the alum with your findings. Either way you are helping to model job search skills. It is a relief for alums to realize you do not have to know everything at the outset for a successful job search journey. However,

alumni do expect you to help them find the answers and require more consistent follow-up from you than students do.

Offer Tools: There are many self-assessment tools available (e.g., Myers-Briggs, the Highlands Ability Battery) that can help your alum better understand his or her natural preferences, the most suitable workplace environments, and how he or she may be perceived by others. This is valuable information in determining the next career move. Suggesting self-assessment can make for more tailored counseling.

Reach Out: Some of your best resources are an office, phone call, or click away. Career services colleagues within your department or at other schools may have handled a similar thorny issue or career transition and be able to help you identify resources and options. One of the goals of the NALP Law School Alumni Career Services Interest Group and its Alumni Quick Tips Working Group is to pool the alumni counseling expertise of NALP members for the benefit of all. Visit www.nalp.org/alumnicounselingquicktips for what

the Group plans to be a growing number of “Quick Tips” available on the NALP website, some of which you can provide directly to your alumni through a link or as a handout.

After counseling a number of alumni, you will notice there are some common scenarios that will help inform your advice to similarly situated future advice seekers. There will always be a need for flexibility and creativity when counseling alumni. However, you will keep building upon your prior counseling experiences to better meet the needs of your constituency and enjoy the counseling process even more.

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