

Alumni Counseling in the Small CSO: Moving from Reactivity to Proactivity

Sonja J. Hayes and Christine A. Guard

All of us in law school career services offices are finding ourselves relating to more alumni these days. There are recent alumni who graduated within the past two years and may need services for finding their first opportunity in the legal market — or even their second or third because they haven't developed strong job search skills or a network yet. Then there are the "middle" alumni who've been out of school two to seven years and may be looking to make a lateral move. And finally, there are the alumni who graduated any number of years ago who are looking to re-enter the market, transition to a new practice area, or even transition out of traditional practice altogether.

Some schools are fortunate to have a dedicated counselor for alumni. This can be true in small, medium, and large CSOs. Some smaller CSOs have added part-time personnel to advise recent graduates and alumni. Sounds great, right? But what do you do in a small CSO when there is no one to dedicate exclusively to alumni needs? A first step that can allow you to develop a breadth of services is to set aside time to prepare and focus on the best services for your alumni. Really think about their needs, about what has been asked of you, and about what has been well received in the past.

Decisions about delivery of services are critical. For example, most of us probably provide individual counseling and/or coaching for our alumni. While one-on-one counseling may be the best course with older alumni, there are many other options for younger alumni to reduce the time demands on a small CSO. In a smaller CSO, it might

be useful to get out ahead of the game in providing services to new alumni.

One way the CSO could maximize impact while minimizing overall time demands might be by hosting an overall session with the third-year class where student needs are identified and materials are made available early in the year. Conducting small group meetings or boot camps specifically focused on preparing a job search strategy, interviewing questions, networking, and other challenges during the third year should impart the skills at a time when the lessons will stick and create a core group of students who can help their classmates or drive their classmates into the programs before graduation. Using the small group format allows a single counselor to reach several or many students in the same amount of time the counselor would have otherwise met with only one student.

Having materials aimed at 3Ls and very recent graduates, in print or online, can also save time. Having sample résumés and cover letters specifically for graduates can reduce material review time. Forwarding the resource ahead of meeting and asking the student or recent graduate to work from it can reduce significantly the time spent on review and help more focused lessons stick. Creating a frequently asked questions resource including the most commonly asked post-graduate questions — such as, how do I list my bar results on my résumé? — can reduce the load of quick questions. Having a networking resource aimed at 3Ls and recent graduates can address the anxiety they feel about having to network. Specifically, creating a list of voluntary bar associations gradu-

ates can access will provide a sense of control and reduce some of the basic counseling load, allowing you to focus in on more complex issues. Other formats to consider could include conference calls or webinars on specific topics — or conferencing alumni in with recent graduates in a specific geographic area.

Finally, having resources targeted to alumni in the lateral class and in the transitional class will also reduce the overall alumni counseling time demand. Often, the lateral class needs a résumé update and reminders on cover letter preparation. In meetings with alumni who are considering leaving traditional practice, a great deal of time is typically spent just helping the alumni gather focus. Having resources that identify non-traditional careers, assist alumni with conducting a reflective self-assessment, and offer examples of résumés for advanced searches will help focus the conversations and lessen counseling time.

Not all of these ideas work at every school. That's why it is critical to assess the services you already provide, determine what is working, and then move forward with what will work best for your

alumni population. If you are not sure what is working, ask! A poll through Survey Monkey or another free site is easy to put together and can generate valuable information to guide your decisions about alumni services. We're also coming upon the time of year when we are already tracking our most recent graduates for post-graduate employment data, so use that opportunity to gather information as well.

Sonja J. Hayes is Director of Career Services at Barry University School of Law, and Christine A. Guard is Director of Career Services at Mercer University School of Law. This article was submitted on behalf of the NALP Law School Alumni Career Services Section.