

Tips on Offering Effective Alumni-Focused Career Programming

by Julie Anna Alvarez and Robert White

The typical career services office (“CSO”) is stretched thin in staffing, time, and resources. Almost all schools now provide career services for alumni, both recent and experienced grads, but a large majority of alumni counselors are also responsible for student counseling, employer outreach, and other functions, and spend less than 50% of their time working with alumni. Support for alumni typically consists of one-on-one counseling, and less than two-thirds of schools provide any career programming for alumni. (Figures are approximations based on initial results of a survey of the NALP Law School Alumni Career Services Section in September 2012.) It can be challenging to find time for all of these obligations, let alone to create and implement alumni-focused career programs. The benefits of offering such programming, however, are persuasive. Alumni obtaining career support from their CSO are more knowledgeable of the job market, better equipped to pursue specific jobs, and more likely to have an actual plan for their careers extending beyond their next job. Benefits to the CSO from working with alumni include:

- Increased alumni willingness to support CSO programming and mentorship programs for current students — they no longer feel like they are always being called upon to help students while their needs go ignored or that the school only reaches out for money;
- Amplified alumni goodwill toward your institution coupled with their career success can encourage more generous financial donations; and
- Augmented job opportunities for both current students and graduates because alumni who have either directly benefitted from your CSO’s support or who are aware of your

service to their fellow alumni are more likely to post full-time and part-time permanent jobs, internships, etc. with your office, and to be willing contacts for job seekers.

These benefits will make it easier for your CSO to achieve its multifaceted mission. Following are some tips and case studies to assist you in creating alumni programming while using resources wisely for maximum impact.

Partner with your alumni relations (“AR”) department: Splitting costs and sharing some of the program implementation tasks can help both departments do more with less and leverage each others’ strengths. CSO staff might focus on panel presentation composition and subject focus, while AR staff can handle event planning details such as catering and venue. Marketing is enhanced by utilizing both departments’ various outreach vehicles such as website postings, newsletters, and other alumni communications for advertising events.

Partner with your alumni association and alumni groups: Alumni executive boards, special interest groups, and social networks that consist of very active alumni are an invaluable source of new program ideas, recommendations for panelists, and avenues for reaching alumni. These groups likely have their ears to the ground and know what alumni need, and alumni are often more responsive to each other than to outreach from CSO or AR staff. Ensure their cooperation by co-sponsoring programs with them and offering to support their projects. Get alumni actively posting your co-sponsored event on the alumni LinkedIn or Facebook page and their fellow alumni will tune in.

Collaborate with local bar associations and others: Depending on your geographic location, co-sponsoring events with a local bar association or professional association can be a win-win. They see it as an opportunity to attract new attorney members, your alumni will be introduced to new networking opportunities, and you will have lightened your programming burden by co-planning the event. The same idea applies to collaborating with local law schools, business schools, or other professional schools and university centers or clinics.

Some Nuts & Bolts Tips:

- Advertise events well in advance and follow up with a recording or summary to drive interest for future programs.
- Include graduates on panels or as moderators or planners to encourage attendance by their peers.
- Ensure program topics are relevant — survey your alumni.
- You don't need a fancy webinar or a PowerPoint to have an informative and engaging program — it's the people that count.
- Use “networking opportunity” in your marketing to draw more alumni attendees, and provide a designated networking time a half-hour before or after the substantive part of the program.

Case Study #1: The Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law hosts an annual Alternative Career Forum aimed primarily at alumni. In some years a panel has kicked off the program, but the main attraction is a well-attended table-talk event where alumni can speak to others who have already transitioned into non-traditional legal (and non-legal) careers. The event design calls for small tables at which alumni can engage in more individualized conversations. Each year the roster of invited “table-talkers” representing a wide spectrum of career

choices grows, making it easier to coordinate subsequent events. A handout entitled “Brief Guide to Alternative Careers” is distributed at the event along with a directory of the “table-talkers” to facilitate networking follow-up. The event, a collaboration with Alumni Relations, generates great positive feedback and goodwill from the alumni.

Case Study #2: When sign-ups for a proposed program on In-House Legal Careers lagged, the UC Berkeley School of Law (Boalt Hall) CSO approached the Alumni Relations department for help and collaboration. The program immediately gained increased attention when advertised in emails coming from the AR department. The AR also helped secure a prominent alum as a panelist, managed the invitation list, and connected the CSO with alums at a local firm that hosted and catered the event. The program was well attended and both the CSO and AR received numerous thank you notes from alums, including offers to host future events and speak on panels as well as an inquiry from one firm looking for another associate. Based on feedback from alums such as, “This was the most truly useful event since I graduated,” the AR actively solicited CSO input in designing some subsequent alumni events to include a career talk or panel.

Although it may be daunting to take on the additional work of providing alumni-focused programming, reaping the benefits doesn't have to involve a major undertaking when you have a plan and openness to leveraging other groups.

Julie Anna Alvarez is Assistant Director & Alumni Outreach Coordinator at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law's Office of Career Services in New York. Robert White is Director of Alumni Career Services at UC Berkeley School of Law (Boalt Hall) in California. Alvarez and White are the Co-Chairs of the NALP Law School Alumni Career Services Section.