

Going Back to Law School:

Moving from Practice to Law School Career Advising

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What do law school career offices do?

Law school career services offices (CSOs) are responsible for student career and professional development and for supporting students as they launch their legal careers. These offices are as varied as the law schools and students they serve. Some are small or even solo operations while others employ teams of professionals to support their student bodies. CSOs may serve populations in large public schools or small private ones, they may exist in ecosystems with lots of administrative support, and in those that are less supportive.

If you are considering a change, you might wonder what CSO professionals do in their jobs. The following are some roles that lawyers (and non-lawyers) can expect to perform in CSOs. Some law school career professionals focus on one or two of these functions while others wear many hats.

Student Advising

Student advising is the cornerstone function of any CSO. Advising may be tactical in nature including resume and cover letter review, interview preparation, networking advice, and job search strategy. Sometimes advising takes more of a coaching form: for instance, completion of a career inventory tool, practice area exploration, and road-mapping of a student's career journey. Such advising is often mandatory or strongly encouraged for 1L students and then occurs throughout their time in law school, particularly at summer or school-year job search junctures.

Student advising requires the career professional to use open-ended questions and active listening to ascertain the student's interests and to help them create career-related goals for themselves. Law student advising also calls upon the professional's thorough knowledge of the legal job market and opportunities available to law students. Advising relationships include a significant element of skill development so familiarity with legal job search best practices and honed teaching skills are a must. Understanding how adults learn, and marketing and communications skills can be helpful to make sure your audience hears what you're saying. To succeed, lawyers making the transition to advisors will have to channel solution-oriented tactics from practice while adapting those tactics to a student audience.

Ideally, the CSO is one of the first and most frequent stops for law students. Career advisors come to know many of their assigned students very well. Many of our students do not know what they want to do for their career. This can be both a challenge and an opportunity for the advisor. One difficulty can be keeping them organized as they explore their career options. The reward of watching students eventually succeed is huge, however.

Public Interest Advising and Programming

While many law students end up working at law firms or elsewhere in the private sector, some are interested in using their law degrees in non-profit, government, or other public interest settings. Advising students pursuing these opportunities requires specialized knowledge of public sector and public interest employers as well as their hiring practices, which often differ from those of the private sector. In addition to the individualized advising, CSOs often host a large number of programs throughout the year aimed at introducing students to public interest employers and connecting them to the lawyers that work for them.

Judicial Clerkship Advising and Programming

One popular position for recent law school graduates is the judicial clerkship. These positions can be intensely competitive, and the application process is very specific. Assisting students in learning hiring timelines and finding relevant opportunities is key to their success. The application materials and interview preparation required for judicial clerkships can be a time- and labor-intensive process. Programming, often in the form of information sessions and panel discussions featuring judicial clerks and/or judges, is one way CSO staff inspire students to put in the work it will take to pursue judicial clerkships.

Some nuances of the clerkship process make this advising path interesting and challenging. Clerks may need help structuring their career path in and out of chambers, as judges may hire on deferred timelines. Additionally, helping set expectations for students seeking these coveted positions will draw on all the emotional intelligence skills that you use in client-facing work in practice. The reward of watching a student obtain one of these coveted roles makes all the work worth it.

Alumni Advising

Contrary to what some believe, the support provided by law school career offices does not end at graduation. For most law schools, career services are available throughout the lifetime of a graduate's career. While these services tend to be used most by recent graduates (alumni seeking their first post-law school position), the advisory services are typically available at any stage of a former student's career. As with student advising, this function requires rapport building through active listening and expertise around job seeking and the current legal market.

Employer Outreach

While most of the functions of law school career professionals are inward-facing, there is also a critical outward-facing element. One of the most important roles a law school career office plays is introducing students to opportunities in their new field. Connecting students to those jobs requires proactive outreach and legwork by the CSO. This outreach includes everything from hosting on-campus interview programs to planning employer-focused programs and jobs fairs. It also includes individualized calls, emails, and meetings with alumni and other local, regional, or national employers designed to promote

your school's students and to drive job postings and participation in interview programs. Increasingly, outreach dovetails with engaging with student groups, who are also

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trying to connect with employers. If your target role calls for outreach duties, a portion of your time likely will be devoted to working with student leaders, co-sponsoring programs, and/or attending student group meetings.

The degree to which a role at a given school requires outreach, however, will vary. Some schools employ advisors or other administrators who perform that function specifically. Still, you might expect to have *some* outreach aspects to your job no matter how the office is structured. And, depending on your school's reach, outreach jobs may require regular or frequent travel.

Such work can be heavy lifting considering how many different employers hire students and entry-level lawyers at any given school. This aspect of the job may draw on organizational and business development skills you have developed while in practice – getting out to meet employers and market the school can be done in many ways, but at its core it requires proactivity, persistence, and a willingness to create new relationships. It is also gratifying to see employers you cultivated relationships with ultimately hire your students.

Professional Development Courses and Programming

One of the most effective tools in the CSO toolbox is its professional development course (or programming if they do not yet have a formal course). This course may be a mandatory part of the first-year law student curriculum in certain schools. Some are pass/fail, others graded. Some carry credit, others do not. All of them share the goal of preparing the student to develop their professional identity and skills. The greatest hurdle in this work is getting buy-in from the students. This hurdle may exist at schools where there is no formal course or any mandatory component to career development: in those environments, you must find a way to communicate guidance and tactics to busy students with many demands on their time and attention. The hurdle may still exist where there is a formal program, as the mandatory addition to student schedules can breed resentment rather than enthusiasm. Once you do get the buy-in, though, this aspect of the work will be extremely gratifying, especially for those bringing with them from practice a love of teaching or training. If onboarding and development were an aspect of your work as a lawyer (perhaps as a member of a recruiting committee, as a trainer, and/or as a mentor), those skills will be put to good use in your programming capacity.

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Data Collection and Reporting

Among the most challenging CSO functions is the collection and reporting of graduate employment data. The American Bar Association and U.S. News & World Report (among others) require annual submission of data on law student employment. A particular word comes to mind when considering the process of collecting dozens of data points on the jobs obtained by each of a law school's hundreds of graduates annually: “onerous.” Difficult though it might be, it is critical to the law school that it be completed timely and accurately; and it is critical to law school applicants that the data reflect the employment realities they will encounter. Some CSO professionals relish this work as a balance to the intensely interpersonal work of their job while others approach it as a necessary evil and annual rite

of passage. Remember those aspects of practice that were tedious and also really important (say, e.g., privilege logs, diligence rooms, signature pages)? Bring your strategies for dealing with those types of assignments and you will get through the reporting season just fine.

Resource Development

CSOs often provide students with written and/or video resources to aid in their job searches. This could include lists of employers complete with information on the location, size, practice areas, and alumni employed there. It could be a resume or cover letter drafting guide. Or it could be tactics-related such as lists of potential interview questions to prepare to answer or questions to be prepared to ask; a resume template; or guidance on responding to job offers. Often those resources are videos containing advice about the job search process or testimonials from alumni or employers. The career resources vary but all schools have some and keeping them current and relevant is one of the many tasks of the CSO professional.

Other Duties as Assigned

Beyond the traditional CSO functions described above lie a whole host of other duties that some but not all CSO staff are required to do. Some CSOs are involved in running their schools' externship programs while others do academic advising or bar preparation. Often CSO staff members are asked to serve on various law school committees or to attend faculty meetings. This is the risk and reward for being valued members of the law school staff.

What other law school roles are often held by lawyers?

While NALP's law school members are typically employed by career services offices, opportunities for lawyers in a law school do not end there. Law schools have numerous opportunities for lawyers in:

- Admissions: Overseeing the law student recruitment and admissions process.
- Advancement/Development: Managing the fund-raising efforts for the law school.
- Alumni Relations: Providing ongoing support, events, and connection with the law alumni.
- DEI: Leading the law school's DEI programming efforts and liaising with affinity groups.
- Student Affairs: Supporting law students' academic and extra-curricular endeavors.
- Many more!

Once inside a law school ecosystem, movement to other roles may be easier than starting an external job search. This resource is not intended to cover all opportunities; to learn more start by browsing through job listings in [*The Chronicle of Higher Education*](#).

Considerations in Making Your Move

As you start to explore this career change and network with others in the field you may notice that many career services professionals have been in their roles for a decade or more. There is a lot of longevity in the profession, and for good reason – there are many great things about a career in law school career services! There are also things that are quite different from being an active practitioner that you should consider before making the move.

What makes people stay?

Work/Life Balance and More Predictable

Schedules. The hours in higher education rarely extend beyond the typical 40-hour work week. When they do, it is usually because of special events and other programs that you know about well in advance. While expectations around client service and response are still high, fire drills, last-minute client demands, and frequent evening or weekend calls or work are atypical in higher education.

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No More Billable Hours. Many people enjoy the freedom of no longer having to count their days in six-minute increments.

Challenging and Evolving Work. The work of a law school career advisor is varied and intellectually stimulating. It also involves a high level of emotional intelligence. As a career advisor, you are helping your students explore career options and knitting together the pieces of their future career. At the same time, you are charged with staying abreast of evolutions in the legal industry — evolving practice areas (remember when no one knew what AI was?), new career paths for lawyers, and more.

Having a Real Impact on the Future of the Legal Profession. As a legal career advisor or other law school administrative professional, you are part of the foundation of your students' legal careers. You help to shape their thinking, planning, and perspective toward their chosen profession. The students you advise will go on to be managing partners, prosecutors, district attorneys, professors, politicians, and more. You will help to shape the future of the legal profession and will be part of their stories.

Working with Law Students. Related to the above, a joy of this profession that many don't think about or realize until they're in the job is the joy of working with law students. On the whole, law students are bright, motivated, curious, and driven people. They each have different reasons for pursuing their legal education, and their stories and backgrounds are varied, vibrant, and fascinating. You will build relationships that will stay with you for years — maybe even a lifetime.

Working in an Educational Setting. As a college or university employee, you also have access to all the larger benefits of being on a campus of higher education. You can attend lectures, symposia, and events. The physical settings tend to be lovely, with green spaces and areas for walking. Larger campuses may also have libraries, museums, or medical centers that you can visit. There's a vibrancy on campuses that definitely add to the energy of your work.

Competitive Benefits. Most institutions of higher education offer excellent benefits, both medical and retirement. Many also offer benefits that you typically find in larger firms, like family planning, mental health services, and financial planning.

Other considerations

Lower Salary. Depending on what kind of legal job you are leaving, you are likely to take a significant pay cut when moving to higher education. Salaries in legal education vary widely depending on the

institution, geographic region, and job title. As an example, the median salary of a second-level professional in a U.S. law school career office in 2023 was \$80,000.¹

Fewer Resources. Law schools have smaller budgets than private law firms, typically significantly smaller. They also have a narrower scope of work, which should be acknowledged. If moving from an organization where money and budgets were fluid or flexible, you are likely to find that adherence to the budget is a top priority in higher education. This often requires getting creative when designing programs, and becoming skilled at advocating and persuading others when you want additional dollars allocated to your department.

Hierarchy of Titles (Real or Perceived). There can be a lot of titles in higher education – from coordinator up through Dean there may be as many as six to eight different levels in the organizational chart. And that’s just for the administrators. There is also often a perceived hierarchy between the staff and the faculty. In many schools, the career office may be the only administrative office staffed by licensed lawyers, but that isn’t always recognized or even known.

Jobs are Bound by Location. Depending on where you live or your willingness to relocate, your options in legal education may be limited. As of 2024, there are only 196 ABA-accredited law schools in the United States and only 24 law schools across Canada.

Upward Mobility May Be Limited. Most law schools have small career offices, and longevity in the profession is common. As a result, opportunities for promotion may be limited to times when people in positions above you move on or retire. This can also mean a potential of topping out your salary for your job title. For some, the other benefits of a career in higher education outweigh this potential limitation; for others, it becomes a source of frustration.

Missing the Practice of Law. As a CSO professional, you are not engaged in the active practice of law anymore. After a time, you may find that you miss it. Some professionals remain active in pro bono practice or maintain a small solo practice on the side, but you will want to be sure to inquire into any policies or regulations that may limit or prohibit these kinds of activities outside of work. Many public institutions of higher education are constrained by laws applicable to their employees regarding consulting, private practice, or other forms of employment outside of their employment with the college or university.

How do you get these jobs?

Develop Your Story to Demonstrate Your Interest

One of the first things law school employers will want to know is why you are interested in law career services. This is not to be confused with why you are interested in leaving the practice of law. Those in this profession love what they do and want to hire colleagues who will, too. That means your focus ought to be on convincing those potential employers that you are thoughtfully enthusiastic about pursuing a career in this field. Your story will come as a result of thorough research on working in this field coupled with some serious self-reflection.

¹ Source: *Survey of U.S. Law School Career Services Offices* (NALP, 2023). A “second-level professional” is someone who reports to the person who is in charge of the career services office.

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Research Your Options to Obtain an Understanding of the Field

In reading this guide, you're already taking the first step in researching your options and understanding this field. Congratulations! Reading as much as you can about work in this field is a great start. (NALP's [Weekly News Digest](#) is a great resource for this!) Law career professionals are prolific writers and the more you can learn about what makes them tick and what keeps them up at night, the more confident you will be in your decision to pursue this line of work and the more successful you will be in interviews.

Once you have read all that you can find, it is time to start talking to professionals in this field. Reach out to as many professionals as you can find to pick their brains about what they do and what they love (and tolerate) about it. This is what we in the field lovingly refer to as the informational interview.

Try to get a wide sampling of perspectives by doing several informational interviews. If you do not know anyone currently in the field, you can start by reaching out to a professional at a law school in your area and inviting them to coffee. Ask them if there are any colleagues at their institution or other local institutions who they would suggest you meet. When reaching out to those folks, you can let them know who referred you to them. You will be impressed by how generous legal career professionals are with their time and sharing their experiences.

Get Involved with Law Schools

Another good way to get to know what we do and to build relationships within the field is to get involved with our efforts. This might mean volunteering at your alma mater or any law school in your target geographic area. There are myriad opportunities: attending networking events, speaking on panels, and hosting mock interviews are just a few. Asking where they need you most will certainly endear you to them.

Participate in Recruiting/Developing Your Counseling Skills

Your experience practicing law will be useful in your role as a legal career professional but to make yourself more marketable, focus on honing your recruiting and counseling skills. Participate in all of your current employer's recruiting activities – attend networking events, interview candidates, or serve on a recruiting committee. Also, find ways to practice your counseling skills outside of your client work – find opportunities to mentor law students and entry-level lawyers, do mock interviews with students, or host students for informational interviews. These activities will prepare you for a law career position and demonstrate your sincere interest in the field.

Reimagine Your Resume/Application Materials

One of the important skills that legal career professionals teach students and alumni is the art of tailoring one's resume and application materials to their intended audience. When hiring, legal career professionals will be looking for this tailoring to be demonstrated by competitive applicants. Refine the

descriptions on your resume to highlight the most transferable skills. Draft cover letters that sing with your understanding of the industry and how your experience makes you an ideal candidate.

Find All Posted Positions

The best news about a job search in the legal career services field is that employers know how to advertise. You can be sure that all available positions will be posted, at a minimum, on the law school job boards. It is also likely that they will be posted to the [NALP Job Board](#). Law career professionals are also expert LinkedIn users, so make sure that you have connections to the law school professionals that you meet to ensure that you see jobs as soon as they are posted.

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Network, Network, Network

The importance of networking cannot be overstated. The law career services industry is a network of expert networkers. Getting to know as many of them as possible is key as is developing strong relationships with those at schools where you are interested in working. The informational interviews you conduct as a part of your research efforts constitute the foundation of your network. Stay connected to those folks through occasional emails and through LinkedIn connections. Do not forget to ask those folks to introduce you to others in the industry. Such efforts will pay off when you apply for positions and the employers are already familiar with your enthusiasm for this work.

Want to learn more?

Find a copy of *Perspectives on Career Services* at your law school's career services library or on the NALP bookstore (www.nalp.org/bookstore).

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