



# CREATING CAREERS

Three Texas law schools give their tips on how grads should start planning for the future.

BY ANGELA MORRIS

**FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF THE LONE STAR** State's baby lawyers, November is an important month to decide which path to take toward their future careers.

Although a minority of Texas law graduates have already accepted job offers from big law firms, there's a different timeline for new lawyers looking to land jobs in small and midsize law firms, government agencies and the public-interest sector. Many legal employers wait until bar exam results come out in November to extend job offers to recent graduates. For current students who participated in on-campus interviews in October, many summer job offers will begin rolling in this month.

With a lot on the line, Texas Lawyer reached out to assistant deans of career services at three law schools spread across Texas to get their advice about how grads should tackle this important and stressful time, making the best decision about their future careers. Here are the top five tips for starting on the career path.



A LAW STUDENT MEETS POTENTIAL LEGAL EMPLOYERS AT A RECRUITING EVENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON LAW CENTER ON FEB. 9.

### ADJUST YOUR EXPECTATIONS

After some peers have wrapped up on-campus interviews and already accepted big law job offers, it's easy for panic to set in for those graduates who are still searching for jobs. This is a good time to step back and recall something that many law schools teach very early about adjusting expectations to match reality.

In orientations early in a law student's first year of law school, career development staff often teach students about the different employment categories in the legal industry, the percentages of students who land jobs there, the academic statistics needed to compete in each category, and the internship or work experience that students must gather for their dream jobs.

"We help them to see all the different choices out there for potential opportunities, and we just tell them straight up—point-blank—this is what's required for these jobs," explained Tiffany Tucker, assistant dean for career development at the University of Houston Law Center.

PHOTO BY ELENA HAWTHORNE

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### KNOW THE TIMELINE

Students should also recall that many legal employers are on their own unique hiring timeline. Small and midsize firms only hire a new grad when they have a need, rather than on a normal timeline, explained Angela Cruseturner, assistant dean of career development at Baylor University School of Law in Waco. Government agencies such as district attorney offices wait to make hiring decisions until a graduate passes the bar exam and earns his law license.

"If you don't go the big law route, it's very likely you will continue your job search into your third year and even until you're licensed. That's OK—that's normal," she said. "Many other students will have that experience."

### CHART A PATH

Some students or graduates already know their dream job.

"I do tell them to be very savvy about managing their career from the very beginning. That entails first having a really good sense of yourself," said Karen Sargent, assistant dean and director of career services at Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law in Dallas. "Know yourself and your personality to know if you have the competitiveness of litigation or you're a number cruncher or you truly enjoy writing. You have a sense of yourself and it can help guide the type of practice you have."

In some employment sectors it's possible to land a graduate's dream job right out of law school—for example, if the person wants to be an assistant district attorney or work in a public defender's office, said Tucker. Other times, the dream job isn't offered to baby lawyers, which necessitates charting a path to arrive at that ultimate goal.





◀ LEGAL EMPLOYERS AND LAW STUDENTS CONVERSE AT BAYLOR UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW.

Both Tucker and Sargent said students and graduates can do online research to learn about career paths that lead to their dream jobs. Sargent said to look up the biographies of lawyers who already have the ideal position, paying attention to their past work experience and the organizations they got involved in.

The social networking site LinkedIn is great for such research. Tucker advises students to find a number of lawyers who have their desired position, and study their resumes to learn the stepping-stone jobs that brought them to the goal.

#### MAKE A LIST

The majority of law graduates will find multiple job opportunities, but the hard part is that job offers might not arrive at the same time. This means a grad must decide whether to accept or reject an offer before she knows what her other options are, Cruseturner said.

“You can only make the decision by the facts you have at that time,” she said.

Slow down and consider all of the important facts: whether the job matches the graduate’s hopes for her practice area, location, salary and benefits, cultural fit, opportunities to grow skills, mentoring opportunities and more.

“The hope is to get into a position for the long haul; a place you want to be and grow your career,” Cruseturner said. “Don’t be afraid to ask the questions and follow up and get the information you need.”

Tucker said that she creates a profile for all Houston

law graduates that explains the grad’s ideal job and breaks it down to various components, listing out steps to get to that job. When the grad receives a job offer, Tucker helps him or her determine how the job would fit.

“Based on that student’s value system, we go through the pros and cons of the job,” she said. “Once they’ve computed all the things that are important to them—from salary to working environment to level of responsibility to career trajectory—all things being equal, we talk about their gut.”

#### START SOMEWHERE

When a graduate has an idea of where she wants her career headed, it makes good sense to pick a job that leads in that direction. But don’t be too picky, Sargent noted. Even if a job isn’t the best, just go start practicing law somewhere.

“I sometimes see graduates who are so focused that they let too much time pass. They are looking for the perfect job,” she said.

She reminds them that after they have one or two years of work experience, they’ll find a huge lateral market offering much opportunity.

“Graduate, get out, and start working,” Sargent said. “Start clocking the time at least in an area you think you want to be in, so you learn about the practice of law and then can make your way in the lateral market.”

*Angela Morris is a freelance journalist. Follow her on Twitter at @AMorrisReports.*

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