

STUDY OF
LAW SCHOOL ALUMNI
EMPLOYMENT & SATISFACTION

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES THREE YEARS AFTER GRADUATION

CLASS OF 2020

NALP FOUNDATION
RESEARCH | RESOURCES | RESULTS



Class of 2020

Study of Law School Employment & Satisfaction
Employment Outcomes Three Years After Graduation

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Selected Results

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Executive Summary

The survey responses were provided by 1,415 Class of 2020 alumni from 35 U.S. law schools, between November 2023 and January 2024.

Employment Profile

High employment: 97% of all respondents reported they were employed at the time of the survey, the same rate as the Class of 2019. Of those, 99% reported full-time employment, with 97% employed in “permanent or long-term” positions (i.e., lasting more than one year). Law firms were the most frequently cited work setting (54%) followed equally by businesses or corporations and government (13% each). Most unemployed alumni were actively seeking employment. *[pp. 27-34]*

Hybrid schedules lead: Roughly one half (54%) of employed graduates reported they worked hybrid schedules, decreasing from the Class of 2019’s 57%. Among graduates working in law firms, hybrid schedule rates increased steadily with law firm size. *[pp. 34-36]*

NEW: In-office days requirements varied: 36% of graduates working hybrid schedules reported their firms did not have policies mandating a set number of in-office days; 35% reported they were required to spend three days in the office per week. Another 13% of graduates reported they were required to work 2 in-office days per week, 10% were required to work four in-office days, while only 6% reported they were required to spend one day per week in the office. *[p. 34]*

Annual Compensation

Broad compensation levels: Those reporting incomes over \$150,000 rose to 38% from the Class of 2019’s 34%, while graduates reporting total annual compensation of \$51,000-\$100,000 declined to 33% from the Class of 2019’s 37%. The levels of early-stage graduates reporting annual compensation exceeding \$300,000 stayed at 6%, the same rate as the Class of 2019. *[pp. 37-43]*

Compensation increased with law firm size: The bulk of graduates working in the largest firms (more than 500 lawyers) reported annual compensation over \$250,000 (57%), while just over half of those working in law firms of 51-100 lawyers reported annual compensation of \$101,000-\$150,000 – 54%. Sole practitioners most frequently reported annual compensation of \$75,000 or less – 27%. *[p. 42]*

Mobility

High mobility: 70% of alumni have held two or more sequential positions since graduation: 42% reported holding two jobs since graduation, with the roughly the same proportion reporting having held three or more jobs (28%) or only one job since graduation (29%). Graduates of color and their White/Caucasian peers reported having held two or more jobs at equal rates, but more graduates of color had held three or more positions than their white peers (36% vs. 22%). [pp. 44-52]

Low levels seeking a job change: 13% of employed alumni reported they were actively seeking a new job, the same rate as the Class of 2019. Male and female graduates sought new positions at comparable rates, while graduates of color sought a move at higher rates than did White/Caucasian graduates. [pp. 53-55]

Top reasons for job changes: Graduates who have held more than one position cited “better compensation/bonuses” (59%) as the primary driver for their job movement, followed by “attitude or ‘fit’ concerns” (41%). [pp. 56-62]

Work Setting and Career Track

Law firm positions: Over one half (54%) of graduates were working in private practice, with no differences between males and females, or between graduates of color and their White/Caucasian peers. The vast majority were practicing lawyers and planned to pursue partnership. [pp.76-86]

Main practice areas: 61% of graduates working in law firms identified “litigation” as their primary practice area; twice the rate of those indicating “transactional” (29%). [pp. 87-88]

Dimensions of Satisfaction

Overall job satisfaction: 47% of Class of 2020 alumni reported being “extremely satisfied” with their current job, while 38% were “somewhat satisfied” – identical rates to Class of 2019. [pp. 89-100]

Work location and job satisfaction: Graduates working solely in the office or hybrid schedules reported higher average overall job satisfaction than those working fully remotely. [p. 91]

Satisfaction metrics for aspects of current roles: Graduates reported they were most satisfied with “job security” and “attitude or ‘fit’ with their organization’s culture,” followed by “level of responsibility you have.” “Compensation” received the lowest average rating. [pp. 93-100]

Key skills for practice: Graduates identified “ethics and professional responsibility,” followed by “teamwork” and “litigation/legal skills” (including legal research, analysis, writing and trial advocacy) as the three most important skill sets for their current positions. [pp. 101-105]

Efficacy of law school preparation: Graduates gave the highest average satisfaction scores with their law school preparation in “ethics and professional responsibility” and “litigation/legal skills;” however, they were notably less satisfied with their preparation in “law practice management skills” (including administrative operations, management skills, project management) [pp. 106-114]

Experiential Learning

High participation: Most graduates (95%) reported they had participated in experiential learning experiences as students: 65% participated in externships, internships, and/or field placements, 62% participated in legal practice skills or simulation courses, while substantially lower levels participated in clinics representing individual clients (54%) and fewer yet participated in policy/issue clinics (15%). Among clinic participants, 67% participated for one semester, while 24% participated for two; 9% participated for more than two semesters.¹ [pp. 117-120]

Discussions with subsequent jobs: A quarter of graduates (25%) reported substantially discussing their experiential courses when interviewing for their first post-graduate position; levels then decreased to 20% for subsequent positions. [pp. 126-128]

¹The ABA requires law school graduates to complete at least six credit hours of experiential education. https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_education_and_admissions_to_the_bar/governancedocuments/2015_standards_303_304_experiential_course_requirement.pdf

Professional Identity Formation

Efficacy of law school preparation: Consistent with prior trends, graduates rated their law school preparation in “lawyer’s obligations to clients and society” and “providing pro bono/community service” the highest, while rating their preparation in “well-being practices” the lowest. *[pp. 130-132]*

Law school resources: Graduates cited professors (63%) and clinical/experiential courses (62%) as their most valued resources for advancing their professional identities as students; only 12% rated Student Affairs programs/resources as such. *[pp. 133-135]*

Post-graduate resources: Graduates identified colleagues and peers (63%) as the top resources for their ongoing professional identity formation. Roughly one half named employer and Bar association programs and events (52% and 47%), while 16% of alumni reported they did not use resources for this purpose. *[pp. 136-137]*

Post-Graduate Law School Engagement

Preferred methods: Graduates identified networking events and mentoring programs as their top choices for engaging with their law schools after graduating, while service in alumni associations and financial support were the least popular engagement methods. *[pp. 139-141]*

Engagement barriers: Limited time (44%) and location/geography (37%) remain the top barriers to graduates’ post-graduate law school engagement. Less than one quarter of participating graduates reported lack of interest (23%) and student debt (15%) as barriers. *[pp. 142-143]*

Increased use of law school career resources: Roughly one half of graduates (52%) reported they had reached out to their law school for post-graduate career assistance (prior years’ rates ranged from 20% to 27%). Faculty and Career Services Office most often listed as graduates primary point of contact. Few reached out to their Alumni Office for this purpose. *[pp. 144-147]*

Financing Legal Education - The View Three Years After Graduation

Educational debt: The average amount of educational debt was \$95,286 (down from the Class of 2019's \$105,546); the median was \$80,000 while debt loads ranged broadly from zero to \$450,000, with the vast majority of educational debt attributable to law school (86%). A substantial proportion of graduates (42%) reported debt loads exceeding \$100,000 three years out of law school, while a still sizable number of graduates (33%) reported having zero debt by this point. *[pp. 148-155]*

Debt loads differed across cohorts: White/Caucasian alumni, graduates working in education and as public prosecutors, and those who attended law schools ranked 21-50 reported the lowest average amount of outstanding debt. *[pp. 149-152]*

Impact on graduates: Not surprisingly, as debt load increased, so did the impact on graduates' job and life choices, and the negative effect on their mental health and well-being. *[pp. 156-157]*

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

Mental health and well-being: Although the pandemic has waned, a sizeable proportion of graduates (34%) reported a continued effect on their mental health and well-being. Notably, the pandemic affected women's mental health and well-being at higher rates than their male peers (36% vs. 31%). *[p. 158-163]*

Additional effects: The shift to remote work was the most frequently reported effect by graduates, while roughly one third reported a negative effect on their ability to repay their educational loans. Those reporting no impact increased marginally to 20% from the Class of 2019's 18%. *[pp. 158-163]*

Methodology

In November 2023, The NALP Foundation and NALP invited the Deans of all ABA-accredited law schools in the U.S. and Canada to participate in this annual research project to measure law school alumni employment status and career satisfaction three years after graduation. The NALP Foundation and NALP provided a standardized electronic survey instrument to participating law schools, who distributed it to their Class of 2020 graduates. Data collection took place between November 2023 and January 2024.

Alumni from 39 law schools throughout the U.S. and Canada participated in the survey. The results in this report reflect the aggregate information collected from 1,415 graduates of 35 U.S. law schools. The average response rate among participating schools was 24%, ranging from 8% to 44%. Both the number and identities of law schools participating in the annual law school alumni surveys varies from year to year, which necessarily may influence results. This year marks the second year of a generous grant that The NALP Foundation and NALP received from the AccessLex Institute® to support the participation of HBCU law schools and law schools with significant levels of students and alumni from groups underrepresented in the legal profession.

This year's survey added new queries to address the number of required in office days, as well as graduates' satisfaction with leadership transparency and communication within their current organizations. The survey continued to probe professional identity formation, the timing of recruitment for post-graduate positions, and reasons for graduates' professional shifts, enabling schools to track key issues and benchmark against other law schools.

The report analyzes graduates' aggregate data, as well as segmenting the data by demographic categories including gender and gender identity, race/ethnicity, first generation status, disability status, work setting, and law school rank (*see Appendix pp. 194-196*). For the purposes of this study, "graduates of color" includes graduates who self-identify identify as Asian, Black or African-American, Latinx, Native American or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Multi-racial and MENA. Many of these groups are underrepresented in the legal profession; additional action is merited and required in order to achieve greater diversity, equity and inclusion within the legal industry.

About The NALP Foundation

The NALP Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization; our mission is to improve the quality and delivery of legal services by advancing excellence in strategic and practical organizational leadership, effective management of legal personnel, professional development of lawyers, access to and diversity within the profession and ethical practices and professionalism. For over 25 years, The NALP Foundation has conducted unique benchmark research, and delivered exceptional educational programming and publications based on this research. For more information on The NALP Foundation and our research and programming, please visit www.nalpfoundation.org.

About NALP

The National Association for Law Placement (NALP) is an association of over 3,000 legal career professionals who advise law students, lawyers, law offices, and law schools in North America and beyond. What brings NALP members together is a common belief in three fundamental things. First, all law students and lawyers should benefit from a fair and ethical hiring process. Second, law students and lawyers are more successful when supported by professional development and legal career professionals. Third, a diverse and inclusive legal profession best serves clients and our communities. That's why NALP members work together every day to collect and publish accurate legal employment data and information, and champion education and standards for recruiting, professional and career development, and diversity and inclusion. For over 50 years, NALP has played an essential role in the success of its members and the lawyers and law students they serve. For more information on NALP, please visit www.nalp.org.