AT A GLANCE
• 6 min read
• NALP Foundation study examines trends from the pandemic.
• Trends include strong employment, high satisfaction, and elevated debt.
• Find out more at www.nalpfoundation.org/bookstore.

PROGRESS, PEDAGOGY, AND THE PANDEMIC: RECENT GRADUATES’ PERSPECTIVES ON LAW SCHOOL AND EARLY-STAGE CAREERS

By Fiona Trevelyan Hornblower, Jennifer C. Mandery, and Skip Horne
With the new academic year now in full swing, it’s a good time to explore answers to some important questions, including: how are recent graduates faring in the legal employment market, what do they report about their professional trajectories to date, and how well do they feel law school prepared them for practice? The NALP Foundation and NALP’s ninth annual U.S. Alumni Employment & Satisfaction study, released this summer, provides new insights directly from the Class of 2018, three years after they graduated. Some of the most intriguing findings include:

**Employment Figures Are Strong**
In a result that will cheer current law students and recent grads (as well as those who work with them), graduates three years out reported very high employment levels: 97% of the respondents are currently employed, with the majority employed full-time, and 87% reporting they are currently practicing law, the highest level recorded across the study’s nine years. A little over half are in private practice (51%), followed by 14% in business/corporations, and 13% in government.

**Professional Satisfaction Stays Up, with a Slight Dip**
While 82% of respondents reported they were either extremely satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their current position, those reporting the highest levels of satisfaction dropped slightly from last year’s 45% to 42% this year.

**High Mobility Continues**
As has been the case with prior classes, over two-thirds of responding alumni have already held two or more sequential positions. However, despite the talent swirl of the past year, the number saying they were actively seeking another position continued to decline, dropping to 14%.

**Hybrid Settings Raise Satisfaction**
As the pandemic becomes an endemic and grinds on, alumni continue to report limited professional impacts, but profound mental health impacts, with women (46%) reporting experiencing these impacts at much higher levels than men (31%). Interestingly, those working on a hybrid schedule reported the highest satisfaction levels, while — in a reversal from last year’s data — those working fully remotely reported the lowest levels of satisfaction.

**Educational Debt Remains Elevated**
Three years after graduation, graduates’ educational debt remains very high — the average was $94,755 and the median was $70,000 — with the vast majority of this debt (83%) directly attributable to law school. Even more concerning, graduates of color reported much higher debt levels than their white peers: $123,336 vs. $85,397. For many alumni, this high debt has affected both their personal lives and their professional options.

“Low salary and high debt make it hard to put away for retirement/investments and I have delayed marriage and children and opening up a firm (which is what I really want to do).”

**Perception of Law School Efficacy Is Mixed**
By far the most common response from alumni was that law school taught them to think critically and rigorously; they felt most well-prepared in litigation/legal skills and ethics but felt their preparation in transactional and business skills lagged, and they

Continued on page 19
identified law practice management and business development skills as the areas where they felt least prepared.

“More than anything, law school taught me critical thinking skills that apply to every single task I complete on a daily basis.”

However, a significant number of respondents also laconically replied that “It didn’t” prepare them to practice, while others declared that law school’s chief value was simply enabling them to take the bar exam, with many noting an ongoing gap between the theories presented in law school and actual practice.

“The practice of law is vastly different than the theoretical and political clouds the professors are lost in. I can honestly say that 5% of what I learned in law school has directly benefitted my practice.”

Experiential Education Works
Alumni cited their clinical experiences in particular as helpful developing critical practice skills, while graduates also noted a direct correlation between their experiential educational opportunities in general (internships/externships as well as clinics) and future employment, both for skills development and for forging connections with mentors and potential employers.

New This Year: Post-Graduate Engagement
This year’s survey added questions about graduates’ post-graduate engagement preferences, and alumni far preferred mentoring and networking opportunities to either service on alumni associations or financial contributions to their law school — an important finding for alumni development and relations efforts. Time limitations and geographic constraints were the most frequently cited barriers to ongoing engagement with their alma maters.

But Wait, There’s More
In addition to detailed information on the above trends, the report about the survey results also contains comprehensive data on compensation, key practice skills, work settings, first-generation graduates, and narrative responses, as well as the data sorted by demographic cohorts and law school rank. The full PDF report for U.S. law schools, and the comparable Canadian report, are both available at www.nalpfoundation.org/bookstore.

All ABA-accredited law schools are invited annually to join the study; the NALP Foundation provides participating schools with a standardized electronic survey instrument to distribute to their graduates. The Class of 2018 study data was collected between September 2021 and December 2021; 1,477 alumni from 30 U.S. law schools participated. Participating schools receive a confidential individual report with their data and narrative responses, as well as the aggregate report.

To discuss your law school joining the Class of 2019 study, please contact Jennifer Mandery at jmandery@nalpfoundation.org.

Learn more at www.nalpfoundation.org.