

# Insights Into Early Stage Legal Careers: Recent Research from The NALP Foundation

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The most recent *U.S. Law School Alumni Employment and Satisfaction* study, released by The NALP Foundation and NALP earlier this summer, sheds new light on key drivers for young attorneys as they navigate their careers and the ongoing pandemic. We'll be sharing some of the most intriguing findings – and ones useful to you in your search role – in this article, along with search consultant and NALSC Director Raphael Franze's reflections on each topic.

Conducted annually, the *Alumni* study surveys lawyers three years after graduation on a host of topics, including employment, compensation, mobility, assessment of law school efficacy, educational debt, and (for the past two years) how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected them and their careers.

**Pandemic Effects:** So how has the pandemic affected junior lawyers – and how is this evolving as it continues? The data from the Class of 2018 study is clear: as the pandemic lingers, its effects are becoming more universal for young lawyers. While 32% of the Class of 2017 reported no pandemic impact on their careers, this dropped to only 13% for the Class of 2018. For many of the Class of 2018 graduates, the ability to work from home (45%) was a major impact (more on this in a bit).

However, more soberingly, nearly one-third (31%) reported that the pandemic had affected their mental health and well-being, and, even more alarmingly, this was cited at much higher rates by women than men – 46% vs. 31%. For many respondents, the impact was economic but in a very specific way – for 20%, it affected their ability to repay their educational loans, but only 4% said the pandemic affected their ability to meet non-educational loan obligations such as mortgages or car loans.

*RF: Whereas the Class of 2017 launched their careers under normal conditions before spending roughly six months working through the pandemic at the time of their survey, the Class of 2018 spent roughly equal parts of their careers working prior to and through the pandemic. Having had less in-person training than their 2017 peers while spending more time working remotely, it may be no surprise that these young attorneys from the Class of 2018 are increasingly impacted by the pandemic. More accurately identifying how the pandemic has affected a young prospect – be it due to training issues and/or degree of success in adapting to remote work (among other pertinent factors) – would be helpful in more successfully assessing where their best next move might be.*

**Mobility:** While the received wisdom is that junior lawyers tend not to move – or should not move – until several years into their careers, the data consistently (and even more so this year) provides a contrary pic-

ture. For nearly a decade, about two-thirds of *Alumni* study respondents have consistently reported already having held two or more sequential jobs in the mere three years since graduating. The Class of 2018 data was in line with this, with 67% reporting having held two or more jobs since graduating; despite the very real talent tornado of 2021, there was not a significant uptick in this rate.

However, there was a significant drop in the number of graduates who reported actively seeking a new position in 2021 to a historic low of 14% (for comparison, the prior year's rate was 19%), and an even lower 9% for those in private practice (with only 7% of those in the largest firms – over 500 attorneys – reporting this). This may reflect active affirmative outreach by firms and search consultants, mitigating the need for graduates to engage in outbound efforts. Those most likely to report they were actively seeking new roles were judicial clerks (not surprisingly), those working in education, and graduates of color.

A whopping 29% of respondents reported having joined their employer within the last year, up from the prior year's 22%. Notably, this also aligned with the results from The NALP Foundation's latest *Update on Associate Attrition* report, which found an unprecedented increase in associate departure rates within the first year of hiring, jumping from 3% in 2020 to 8% in 2021.

*RF: With lateral movement in this category consistently on the rise year-over-year, junior attorneys represent a segment of the legal profession that is now fair game for recruitment efforts. Furthermore, representation of such attorneys not only warrants a full fee for the recruiter but (as we've seen recently) ample signing bonuses for the attorney as well. Whether such compensation is the new normal remains to be seen. It is fair to say, however, that the stigma of being a recently minted attorney on the lateral job market is a thing of the past. Should a particular junior attorney feel hesitant about looking earlier in their career, presenting them with such research would go a long way in putting their concerns to rest.*

**Work Location Preferences:** In a surprising reversal, graduates working from home reported the lowest job satisfaction levels in the *Alumni* study; last year, they had higher levels. For the Class of 2018, working a hybrid schedule appears to be the sweet spot, with those in this position providing the highest satisfaction ratings, followed by those working full-time in the office.

*RF: Should full-time work from home in fact correlate with low job satisfaction over future surveys, opportunities for junior attorneys to live and work outside an urban area in which a prospective employer has an office are likely to dwindle. A slowing job market would only expedite movement in that direction. Helping prospects understand the changing perspectives on remote arrangements and tempering their expectations accordingly will be helpful in serving them effectively.*

**Educational Debt:** The impact of educational debt – specifically law-school-related debt – cannot be overstated for recent graduates. On

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average, graduates reported current outstanding educational debt of \$94,755, with the vast majority of this – 83% – directly related to law school alone; 40% of graduates had debt of \$100,000 or more. Troublingly, graduates of color reported substantially higher debt levels, with an average of \$123,336. For many, their debt has constrained their professional opportunities, forcing them to accept positions they felt were less than ideal, as well as affecting life decisions regarding marriage, parenthood, and home purchasing.

*RF: Engaging a prospect about their debt obligations can help both of you gain a better grasp for what opportunities are realistic to consider. For instance, a junior attorney prospect who insists on moving away from traditional law firm work while also admitting that their debts are a heavy burden would be well-served to better understand the discrepancy in pay across the various legal job categories and be spared the reality of receiving a salary offer that they find unacceptable.*

**Career Resource Preferences:** Although most of the graduates would have engaged to varying degrees with their Career Services office, faculty, and others while in law school, these connections appear to evaporate once they depart their alma mater. In fact, over three-quarters report they had not reached back to their law schools for career assistance since graduating.

*RF: A recruiter who also sees their role as that of an advisor is likely to have more success throughout their career; this is especially the case for those who serve junior attorneys. With young alumni connecting less with their law school career services departments, recruiters have a great opportunity to fill that void so long as they are also acquiring the skills to serve in this capacity properly.*

Copies of the Class of 2018 study results are available at [www.nalpfoundation.org/bookstore](http://www.nalpfoundation.org/bookstore). For more information about The NALP Foundation and its research, please visit [www.nalpfoundation.org](http://www.nalpfoundation.org), or contact [info@nalpfoundation.org](mailto:info@nalpfoundation.org).

*Mr. Franze's comments herein reflect his views rather than those of The NALP Foundation.*

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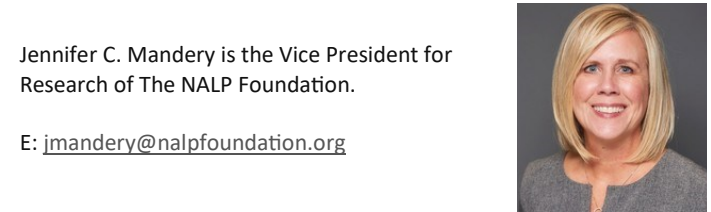
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