

Dealing with Grades

I'm Not in the Top 10 (or 30, or 50) Percent! I'll Never Get a Job!

The most important advice about dealing with grades that are lower than you expected is DON'T GIVE UP! Too many people who finish out of the top ten, thirty, or fifty percent of the class believe that all doors are closed to them. This is not true. Although your job search might be a bit more labor-intensive for you than for someone at the top of the class, with focus and persistence you *can* get a job, even with less-than-stellar grades.

It is true that some employers, such as large firms, do focus on grades, and it is harder to get these positions if you are not at the top of your class. However, for most employers, grades, while important, are not the most important factor in hiring. Remember that 90% of law school graduates did not graduate in the top ten percent of the class. Fifty percent did not graduate in the top half. This translates into a multitude of both practicing attorneys and law graduates who chose non-traditional careers – potential employers – who will understand and empathize with your situation. The challenge for you is to find those employers. The best way to do this is through networking. While on-campus interviews might be the most visible way law students get jobs, the reality is that a very small percentage of legal jobs are obtained through on-campus interviews. Most legal jobs are not advertised. Instead, they are obtained by word-of-mouth – by networking your way in.

Networking Your Way to an Interview

Networking often sounds scary or intimidating, but it really isn't. Kimm Walton's book *Guerilla Tactics for Getting the Legal Job of Your Dreams* offers tips and suggestions for networking as well as on the job search in general. This book is available at major bookstores, and you can also check out a copy from the Career Services Office.

You'll want to start your networking by letting your friends and family know that you're looking for a job. You may not know any attorneys, but you're likely to know someone who does. The author of this handout found her summer clerkship during law school via a friend of her mother's who knew an associate at a small firm that was experiencing an upswing in their litigation practice and needed some extra help. The job was unadvertised, and she never would have found it without a bit of networking.

One great way to network with potential employers that few students take advantage of is to participate in the local bar associations. Both the Dallas and Tarrant County Bar Associations offer discounted membership rates for students. The groups offer CLE courses and CLE luncheons on various legal topics, as well as having special meetings for substantive law sections like bankruptcy and intellectual property. These events are excellent opportunities to learn more about different specialties and meet attorneys, most of whom will be happy to talk to you about their practice.

Other networking ideas include talking to professors and the Career Services Office about alums working in your field of interest and contacting them, taking part in the Inns of Court program, and watching trials at the courthouse and introducing yourself to the judge and attorneys afterwards. If you're very self-confident, you could even try cold-calling firms you're interested in by phone or in person. Just remember to do your research on the firm ahead of time, and be prepared to hit more than a few dead-ends.

The most important thing to remember in networking is that you're not asking for a job. You're asking for help. When you meet attorneys or people in a field you're interested in, introduce yourself as a student and ask questions like:

"I'm interested in real estate law. How can I get into that area of practice?"

"What advice do you have?"

"What classes should I take?"

"What do you like about your job?"

The last question you should ask is, "Who else should I talk to?" This is important because your goal is to make more contacts. Remember, the more people who know your name, the more likely they'll know someone who has an opportunity for you, and that they'll recommend you for that opportunity. Always have a pen handy to write down the names and phone numbers of contacts, and be sure to ask if you can say you were referred by the person you're talking to. Chances are, they'll say yes. Be sure to thank your new contact for his or her time, and get a business card so that you can send a thank you note later.

Other Things You Can Do to Diminish the Impact of Your Grades

Practical experience and extracurricular activities in law school are wonderful additions to your resume and can go a long way towards diminishing the impact of your GPA. In addition, you can often make useful contacts through those activities to use in your networking. If you're an outstanding speaker, try out for the mock trial or moot court teams. If research and writing's more your thing, work as a research assistant for a professor, or write an article for a legal publication on a topic you're interested in.

Volunteering - for judges, public interest organizations, firms or solo practitioners - is another great way to get experience. Contact the Career Services Office for more information on volunteer opportunities. Take advantage of opportunities to gain experience while also getting school credit, like the externship program, practicums, and the law clinic.

Also, don't overlook the value of student organizations. Participation is not only a great way to meet other students and get involved in the law school, but running for office or organizing talks or activities shows leadership skills you can highlight on your resume and in interviews. You can also make contacts through alumni who were involved in the organization in law school - talking to them about their experiences and what you're doing in the organization now is a great way to break the ice and make a connection.

Talking About Your Grades in the Interview

Once you've received an interview, you will want to prepare to talk about your grades if asked. Not all employers will ask about them, but some do. Come up with an explanation for your grades, and point out what you've done to improve them. For example, someone who took time off before coming to law school could say, "I had been out of the academic world for a few years and it took me a bit longer to adjust to studying and taking exams again. However, I discussed my exam performance with my professors and addressed my weaknesses. As you can see from my transcript my grades improved my second semester, and I believe they will continue to improve as I progress."

After you've explained your grades, you'll want to point out what makes you a great hire anyway, such as the experience you gained as an extern for a local judge, your great public speaking and trial advocacy skills you gained on the mock trial team, leadership abilities you showed in a student organization, or your excellent research and writing skills as evidenced in the article you published in a bar association newsletter.

Some Final Thoughts

Most importantly, use the resources available in the Career Services Office to your advantage. Too often, students presume that if they are not at the top of the class, the Career Services Office is not interested in helping them. This is untrue. We are here to serve all students, regardless of their grades. We can assist you in developing networking skills, in locating alums and practitioners willing to talk to you, and in finding jobs and volunteer opportunities. We also have a wealth of job search information available in our library for you to check out. Please make an appointment with us to discuss your job search or just drop in during office hours – we're always here to help!