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**Belyn: "Everyone has something to offer. Grades are not always indicative of how someone is going to perform."**

by Olivia Clarke

## Career choices: Attending a top law school can open more doors for new lawyers

**Brule: "I think the first thing that law firms are essentially looking for is a way to filter their applicants."**

**W**hen Pamela Mitchell Belyn first entered law school she didn't understand how law firms recruited or what they looked for in candidates.

Belyn assumed that attending Case Western Reserve University School of Law in Cleveland would put her in a good position after graduation because of the law school's proximity to many Fortune 500 companies.

She believed she would find a law job anywhere in the Midwest, but she was wrong.

"Legal communities are like, 'Okay, where did all of our partners come from? They're doing well, so let's go recruit from that school.' That's ingrained," she said. "I had very few law firm interviews coming out of law school because I was not the typical straight from undergrad to law school person and not in the top five of my class. Job experience prior to law school seemed to be a hindrance."

Those considering law school must decide if it matters where they earn their law degrees. Some law firms prefer to hire first-year associates from only the top law schools, and will only consider interviewing those from lower-tier law schools if they are at the top of their class.

Where students attend law school often makes a difference when trying to get an interview, hiring partners said. But once they get in the door, they must have additional qualities to get their first law job.

According to *Chicago Lawyer's* annual survey of the largest Illinois firms, the majority of the 20 largest Illinois law firms hired most of their first-year associates in the last two years from the higher-ranked law schools.

"I think law firms are doing a better job than when I was in school, and they are coming out and sort of expanding their horizons and looking at students," Belyn said. "But there's more to be done. There are other schools in the region, and by that I mean the Midwest, that have just as much to offer.

"To the law schools, I would want to convey that career services should really service all of your students, and not just the cream of the crop."

### Planning for the future

After attending a Cook County Bar Association minority job fair, Belyn got her first law job at PricewaterhouseCoopers

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Partner Michael J. Philippi, executive committee member and chair of the litigation department at Ungaretti & Harris, received many rejection letters when he applied for his first law firm job, and this is just one example. He framed this particular rejection letter and displays it on his office wall because it was from the firm he now works at. In the same frame he put his announcement of making partner.

in Chicago.

About three years later, she tried again to get a law firm job.

“Law firms don’t want someone who has been at an accounting firm because in their minds you can’t practice law, you are a bean counter,” she said. “I had very sophisticated training and technical knowledge, but nobody wanted it.”

She looked at every firm in the city, but only got one interview, and took that job at Harris Kessler & Goldstein. After working there about four years, a recruiter at Much Shelist Denenberg Ament & Rubenstein called her. She liked that the firm wanted somebody with her tax background. Today she works as an associate at Much Shelist in a job she loves.

She recommends to legal recruiters: “Think outside of the narrow box. Everyone has something to offer. Grades are not always indicative of how someone is going to perform.”

Students should aggressively work with career services, she said.

“Unless you are ranked one through 10 in your class, your on-campus interviews are going to be limited,” she said. “You have to be creative and find your own way.”

Partner Michael J. Philippi, an executive committee member and chair of the litigation department at Ungaretti & Harris, also said students must create their own opportunities.

Philippi, who graduated from Valparaiso University School of Law, received only one job offer, from Friedman & Koven, after sending hundreds of resumes to law firms. He kept each of his rejection letters, including one from Coffield Ungaretti Harris & Slavin. After Friedman & Koven dissolved two years

later, he interviewed with Coffield Ungaretti Harris & Slavin and was hired. Now called Ungaretti & Harris, he has worked there ever since.

The initial rejection letter from the firm, and the announcement of making partner there are framed together and hang on his office wall.

“You keep trying,” he said. “If you are a law student, especially if you want to be a litigator, you better not take failures personally. You can’t be thin-skinned. You fail almost all the time, at least when you come from a school where you are not recruited.”

He said it would be naive to say that going to a first-tier law school does not matter. Those who graduate from the top law schools receive more opportunities when searching for their first jobs. But the playing field gets more even after finding that first job, he said.

“Most people going to law school don’t end up at the major firms downtown making \$160,000 a year starting out of law school,” he said. “Get the best job you can. Don’t always look at size. We have an awful lot of people who work here who used to work at mega firms — for whatever reason. There are lots of opportunities. They should keep trying.”

Jenny S. Kim, an associate at Neal, Gerber & Eisenberg, said law school ranking played into her decision of where to attend law school, but it wasn’t the only criterion. She decided to attend the University of Illinois College of Law, even though she was accepted at higher-ranked law schools because she knew the school would be a direct route to a Chicago job.



Jenny S. Kim

She also chose that law school because she could stay in-state, and receive financial assistance.

Where a new lawyer attends law school matters when trying to get an interview at some firms, she said.

“Unfortunately, each firm sees hundreds or thousands of resumes a year,” Kim said. “I’m sure a firm needs to make a cut somewhere. I think once you get in the door, [where you went to law school] more or less falls away because each attorney, at least at Neal Gerber, is evaluated by what skills he or she brings to the table.”

Partner Stuart P. Shulruff, who is on the board of directors and the executive committee at Katten Muchin Rosenman, said he did fairly well at the University of Illinois and on the LSAT, but wasn’t serious about attending law school.

He was waitlisted at the University of Illinois College of Law. And he didn’t apply to Northwestern University School of Law because he didn’t believe he would get in, and it wasn’t financially possible to go there.

Shulruff said Loyola University Chicago School of Law was the best school for him, based on his geographic preference. While he received a good legal education, he said firms consider where new lawyers attended law school.

Even though he graduated from Loyola with a law degree, and already had an accounting degree from the University of Illinois, and had passed the CPA exam, he said, “no large firm would even talk to me. I didn’t take it personally. They didn’t talk to anybody at my law school.”

Katten impressed him because the firm looked at him as a person, and not



Lydia R.B. Kelley

only at where he went to law school.

Shulruff said new lawyers should show they want to work hard, are committed, and have good personal skills. Getting hired at a major law firm shouldn’t be something a new lawyer feels entitled to, but should be something he or she is willing to earn.

“The profession and business of law has changed so much in the last 20 years,” he said. “The price of legal services has gone up and salaries have gone up. There is more pressure now than there ever has been. It is important to take a step back and, when you look at successful people in the firm, look at why they are successful. Where one goes to law school, yeah, it’s important, but not any more important than any of the other attributes I mentioned.”

Jennifer R. Quinn, a partner at Ungaretti & Harris and a former member of the firm’s hiring committee, moved from New Mexico to Chicago to attend The John Marshall Law School on a full scholarship. She was not familiar with the Chicago law firm community, but she said she today realizes the risk she took going to a lower-tier school.

If she had to do it over again, she probably would have gone to a different school, she said. She doesn’t regret her decision, and feels lucky to be at her current firm, but, she said, she could have had more choices.

Going to a third- or fourth-tier school can be a point against new lawyers looking for a job, Quinn said, because a perception exists that clients pay attention to where the lawyers attended law school. The mid-size firms compete against the larger firms in the city, and need all the competitive



Marc Benjamin

advantages they can get, she said.

Firms also look for new lawyers who fit with the firm. She recommends that job candidates pay attention to everything — from the firm’s mission to the paintings on the wall — to find that connection.

Where someone goes to school is even more important today, Quinn said.

“There’s a higher number of people in law school now, and that’s been the case for several years, probably five years,” she said. “It’s a very competitive market right now and it’s definitely in favor of the firms.”

### Picking a law school

Leonard F. Amari, president of John Marshall’s board of trustees, said he believes the rate of lawyers graduating law school and getting placed within nine months doesn’t differ greatly from school to school.

Large law firms often hire from first- or second-tier law schools, and those hired usually make more money than those at smaller firms, Amari said. But those who attend first-tier law schools may not have access to the level of networking that exists at lower-tier law schools. Networking can help lawyers build a book of business and make connections, he said.

If law students want to work at big law firms and make large salaries, then going to a higher-ranked law school certainly makes those goals easier, said Bill Chamberlain, assistant dean for career strategy and advancement at Northwestern’s law school. But law firms that pay high salaries may demand a lot from lawyers.

Law students should consider their

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goals, he said. Law schools sometimes specialize in certain practice areas, and it may work in the students' favor to attend a law school in the city or region where they plan to practice.

"If you excel at any law school, you are not going to have trouble getting a job," he said. "It is true that if you are not at the top of the class, you are probably going to have a tougher time. That is just a fact of life."

Law students need to take a look at what makes them happy, said Marianne Deagle, assistant dean for career services at Loyola's law school. Students must consider what they want to do when they graduate, Deagle said. If they hope to work at a large firm, then where they go to law school can affect the number of interviews they receive.

She said some law firms look more at law school ranking than they did in the past because they don't have time to really dig into a person's qualifications. Some firms get caught up in the prestige of hiring an associate who attended a top law school, she said.

"I think if law firms would get past the rankings and really focus on figuring out what kind of person has historically been successful there at the firm, and what are the aspects or qualities that made that person a success, and how do we tap into that and get those qualities, I think they would be much better off," she said. "Instead of looking at the resume, looking at the grade point average, looking at a school, and hiring them. It is too superficial."

Law students need to research the different law schools because they are making a large investment, said Abbie Willard, associate dean for career services and public initiatives at the University of Chicago Law School.

For example, those interested in a judicial clerkship should find a law school where they can work with faculty and develop their legal research skills, and those hoping to teach should look for law schools committed to scholarly work, Willard said.

Students need to think about where they plan to practice after graduation because a good law school in one region may not be considered a good school in another region, said Larry A. Green, co-owner of Winston & Green, a legal search firm with recruiting and diversity experts. Law students need good grades regardless of where they go to school, Green said.

Many large law firms traditionally search for strong minority candidates at the same top-rated law schools, Green said. But he encourages them to also recruit top minority students from the regional schools, because they will be grateful for the shot, will perform well, and probably stay longer.

Belyn, from Much Shelist, said many minority law students do not take the traditional route to becoming lawyers.

Some minority law students go to school part-time because they must also work or cannot afford a full-time program. But they may get overlooked

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when firms only look at traditional students, she said.

"You are missing out on a whole squad of qualified students because you only look at full-time, top 10 students at one particular or a handful of schools," she said. "So you are missing out on a whole [group] of the minority community or diverse community."

**Getting hired**

Finding talented candidates who will stay at a firm becomes more challenging every year, hiring partners say.

"I think the first thing that law firms are essentially looking for is a way to filter their applicants," said Sarah Brule, branch director of Robert Half Legal. "They are really looking for guidelines they can put in place to sort out the candidates that will be the most successful in their law firm."

According to the *Chicago Lawyer* survey, McDermott Will & Emery hired most of its first-year associates in the last two years from law schools at the University of Illinois, Northwestern, and the University of Michigan.

Partner Lydia R.B. Kelley, firm-wide co-hiring partner at McDermott, said where a student attended law school is one of many factors.

The firm understands that many reasons exist for why a student chooses a

particular law school, including the availability of financial aid and the flexibility of night classes, Kelley said.

The firm also looks for qualities like capability, collaboration skills, intellectual capability, and entrepreneurial spirit, she said.

"It's critical to be as certain as we can that the candidate we make an offer to has those qualities or has the ability to polish these qualities," she said. "Attrition is very expensive to large firms and has an effect on morale. We want to do the best job we can at the front end to make sure that the candidate has the best chance at succeeding at our firm."

Those who want to practice in Chicago should consider the local law schools because alumni work in virtually all the law firms in the city, she said.

Many law firms acknowledge the existence of surveys that rank law schools, she said.

"I think a lot of hiring partners and recruiting staffs are mindful of the fact that the variables that go into many of the [law school] surveys don't necessarily translate into what produces a great lawyer," she said. "But having said that, we all look at the surveys."

Pircher, Nichols & Meeks, a real estate boutique firm, is very selective in who it hires, said Marc Benjamin, hiring partner in the Chicago office. All the lawyers in the Chicago office either graduated from top schools or were at the top of their class in schools near the top tier, Benjamin said.

The firm's primary focus for on-campus recruiting has been at the law schools at the University of Chicago and Northwestern.

He said his firm is probably more similar to the big firms in its hiring practices because of its specialty, and because it often represents parties in significant deals where the larger law firms represent the other side.

"We are a very highly sophisticated, complex practice, and we really need to have the best and the brightest," he said. "If you are excelling at a school where the only people who got in there got straight A's in college, you are clearly very bright. We need that type of person because we're working on complex matters that unfortunately need that brain power."

According to the *Chicago Lawyer* survey, Jenner & Block hired most of its first-year associates in the last two years from law schools at the University of

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Chicago, Michigan, and the University of Illinois.

Charlotte L. Wager, a partner and co-chair of Jenner & Block's hiring executive committee, said a top law school is indicative of the academic performance of the job candidate. Where a person goes to law school can be a way to narrow the list of candidates, but the interview process goes much deeper, said Wager, who is also director of professional development.

Reginald J. Hill, also a partner and co-chair of Jenner & Block's hiring executive committee, said his firm looks at the entire student, which includes where they went to school, their academic achievements, and any other skills.

The firm also wants new associates with strong leadership and communication skills. Things like prior work experience, school leadership positions, writing skills, and being a member of law review also can help a candidate stand out, they said.

The firm increased the number of law schools it recruits from because of the need for more associates, and also to increase diversity among candidates, Hill said.

"For the top candidates coming out of law school, they will have multiple opportunities," Hill said. "Somewhere beyond the top, there are people who are

going to struggle to get one opportunity. There is no question about it."

Hinshaw & Culbertson hired most of its first-year associates in the last two years from Northern Illinois University College of Law, DePaul University College of Law, and John Marshall, according to the survey.

Hinshaw does almost no on-campus recruiting, and instead chooses to find job candidates through the resumes it receives, said David R. Creagh, partner and chairman of the hiring committee.

"We certainly focus much more on the person," he said. "We are very demanding in our selection process, and we have the luxury of doing that. There are a lot of [candidates] out there, and the job market is very tough. We have the opportunity to be very selective."

The law school tier-system matters when considering new associates, he said. From an academic standpoint, the best law professors teach at the top law schools, so students receive the best education at those schools, he said.

"I am not naive. If I have the exact same candidates and one comes from a school we've had better success with and is probably harder to get into, certainly being at that law school gives those people an edge," Creagh said. "[But] we just don't go into this with a preconceived notion that if you are from a particular law school, then you are

out."

Winston & Strawn hired most of its first-year associates in the last two years from law schools at the University of Illinois, University of Chicago and Michigan, according to the *Chicago Lawyer* survey.

Partner Dan Webb, the chairman of Winston & Strawn, said large law firms clearly give certain top law schools in the country priority when hiring — a reality of the competitiveness of these firms.

But he believes that some people should be considered even though they graduated from law schools that are not in the top tier.

"I probably believe that because of my own background," said Webb, who attended night law school at Loyola. "You can look at the people who are successful in the practice of law today, and they don't all come from the top law schools."

He looks for new lawyers who show a strong work ethic, and a willingness to devote themselves completely to the job. They also must have strong intellectual skills, and the ability to interact comfortably with others.

"I'm looking for a fire in the belly," he said, "and I gauge it by how enthused they appear to be in engaging in litigation practices and how committed they want to be."★