

Counseling Gay and Lesbian Law Students

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by Deborah Howard

The best assistance a career services professional can give to gay and lesbian students is an awareness and understanding of the issues they may be encountering. Gay and lesbian students, members of the "invisible minority", face the difficult choice of whether or not to inform potential employers of their sexual orientation. Moreover, for those students who wish to inform employers of their sexual orientation, the question arises as to when in the job search process to do so.

The decision of whether or not to be open about sexual orientation is a very personal one. It is not the career services professional's job to make such a decision for students. As with most counseling issues, the task is to provide students with an opportunity to review their options in a nonjudgmental setting to enable them to come to a decision for themselves.

One of the most commonly asked questions by gay and lesbian students starting out in their job search is whether or not to include membership in a gay and lesbian organization on their resume. Many career services professionals, knowing that many firms are anything but open in their attitude towards homosexuality, may automatically counsel their gay and lesbian students not to include such information on their resumes. However, what career services professionals are forgetting when they give such advice, is that the role of counselor is not to make decisions for students but to help explain options and the possible consequences of choices.

Gay and lesbian students should be given a realistic explanation of possible consequences of including membership in a gay and lesbian organization on their resume. Being honest with students about the existence of discrimination is the best policy. Make students aware of the possible consequences of their decisions before they make any decisions. Let them know that, in some cases, including membership in a gay and lesbian organization on their resume may result in their resume being put in the "circular file" (the garbage). In other cases, however, such a declaration on their resume may be considered an asset.

Some students may have their hearts set on working for a firm that is not likely to view their sexual orientation with favor. Discuss with students both the consequences of "coming out" and of not doing so. While coming out may result in a resume not being considered, not coming out has unfavorable consequences as well. Discuss with students the issues of feeling isolated and alienated in a firm that does not accept who they are. Encourage students to talk to gay and lesbian attorneys to learn about their experiences in different employment settings.

Some students may feel very strongly about wanting to be open about their sexual orientation and are willing to work only in an organization that will be accepting of their sexual orientation. They may see coming out on their resume as a necessity. Such students can be counseled about the importance of networking to obtain information about employers to whom they are considering applying. By talking to gay and lesbian attorneys in practice, they can obtain information about the firm atmosphere and attitude toward gays and lesbians. Moreover, they can get information about firm policies that affect gays and lesbians - for example, whether health care benefits apply to gay

and lesbian partners.

Other students may wish to be out once they are employed but may not want to jeopardize their applications. These students can consider waiting until after they have been given an offer to bring up the topic of their sexual orientation.

To be considered accessible by gay and lesbian students, career services professionals must let it be known through their actions that they are concerned with the issues gay and lesbian students face. Co-sponsor events with the gay and lesbian student organization; meet with the members of that organization to discuss issues of interest to them; create resources with information and articles of interest to gay and lesbian law students or attorneys; have information available on bar associations and organizations for gay and lesbian attorneys. A little bit of outreach on the part of the career services office can go a long way.

In the end, each student must make decisions appropriate to their own values. Knowing their options and having information about the potential consequences of their choices will enable them to make educated and intelligent decisions.