

# Schola2Juris — Can You Really Recruit Students in Three and a Half Months?

by Kathleen Pearson

The idea was simple. Shorten the law student recruiting cycle from twelve months to three and a half. That's right. Shorten the legal recruiting model by nearly 70%. After the firm was ready to take the leap, it was time to actually implement our new Schola2Juris Apprentice Program. Would students apply? Would the right students apply? Would they choose their practice groups? Could we evaluate them appropriately with hypotheticals? Could we get to know them well enough? Turns out, we could and we did.

This July we opened our Schola2Juris Apprentice Program to all 3Ls nationwide. Students applied online through our website and submitted cover letters, résumés, transcripts, writing samples, and practice group preferences. We had hundreds of applicants from more than 70 different law schools from across the country. Previously, we only saw law school applicants from the seven schools we historically visited for OCI. Roughly half of the total applicant pool was ranked in the top 25% or better at their schools. Our 2011 Schola2Juris Apprentice class boasts a top 16% class ranking average, which is comparable to our class rankings with a more traditional recruiting program. Schola2Juris clearly gave us access to a much broader and diverse pool of candidates without compromising our academic standards.

Brent Moreland, a third-year law student at the University of Tennessee College of Law and Corporate Apprentice commented, "There were a couple of aspects of the Schola2Juris program that appealed to me. The first was the chance to apply for an actual job opening in a specific practice area. I heard a lot of stories about people who went to

work at law firms expecting to practice in one area who ended up being shuffled around to a practice area that didn't really fit their talents and interests. By the end of two years of law school, I was confident I am more suited to be a transactional lawyer than a trial lawyer, so I jumped at the chance to apply for a job in that type of practice."

Once the application process was complete, each practice group evaluated their candidates and selected five to ten for a video or in-person screening interview. Final candidates were then brought to our Nashville office for an additional interview with a panel of lawyers for each practice area. The entire selection process took two weeks as opposed to the typical three-to-four-month-long OCI schedule. Our inaugural Schola2Juris Apprentice Class started on September 2, 2011 — a mere two months after they applied.

Next it was time to see how the program would really work. Each practice group designed a training project based on matters similar to those typically handled in its respective area. Each apprentice worked on assignments that spanned the life of a client matter from start to finish. This provided the apprentices with a more complete idea of the type of matters handled by the group, how their work fit into the whole picture, and how the attorney teams work together.

Moreland adds, "I found the use of hypothetical assignments that gave an in-depth look at various phases of a business venture to be more interesting and helpful than the work I did in other clerkships, which usually involved looking at ancillary issues in a variety of practice areas without ever seeing a

bigger picture. I think the background I gained in this program will help me as a young associate to better understand the context of the work I will do.”

Of course, we also needed to build in “face time” for the apprentices to get to know the culture of the firm and meet others outside their groups. Half-way through the program, we brought everyone back to the office for the Fall Apprentice Retreat. While at the office, the apprentices job shadowed with their groups, had dinners with associates and partners, attended a Fall Gala, saw a bit of Nashville, and cheered on our NFL football team, the Tennessee Titans, with the associates.

Moreland continues, “I will say that my biggest concern about the program was that, unlike the traditional summer clerkship, I would not have an extended period of time to meet people at Waller and get a sense of what it’s like to work there. However, the weekend retreat and the process of working with a mentor more than satisfied this concern. I spent two full days meeting one-on-one with people in the corporate group, and I had regular interaction with and feedback from my mentor. I felt like these processes actually provided more one-on-one time with people than I’ve received by going into an office every day for six weeks. The confidence of knowing the people in the corporate practice group and the type of assignments I will be doing allows me to look forward to starting at Waller rather than sweating the details. It also gives me the chance to benefit from the third year

of law school by choosing courses that pertain to the work I will do at Waller Lansden as an associate beginning next fall.”

As a result of our inaugural Schola2Juris program, we will welcome five new associates to the firm next fall in our corporate, real estate, healthcare and finance practice groups. The entire process from application to job offer took just three and a half months. By focusing our hiring needs on specific practice areas, we have aligned our hiring needs with that of our clients. The targeted nature of Schola2Juris has cut our recruiting costs in half, including both expenses and lawyer time, without compromising the quality of our recruiting pool. Our new associates will come in next fall with a jump start on their training and a deeper understanding of the work they will be performing. Is it perfect? No. Will we make some improvements for next year? Of course. In the end, however, Waller Lansden took a chance and tried a new approach. And it worked!

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*Kathleen Pearson is Director of Professional Recruiting for Waller Lansden Dortch & Davis, LLP, a firm headquartered in Nashville with nearly 200 lawyers. For additional background on the Schola2Juris Apprentice Program, see “A Lesson in Change: Moving Beyond ‘Because That’s the Way We’ve Always Done It’” in the June 2011 NALP Bulletin.*