

Diverse Law Firms Downplay Grades, Use Activism as Recruiting Tool

By Debra Cassens Weiss

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California law firms that have been successful in recruiting women, minorities and gays share their secrets in a study commissioned by the law firm Fenwick & West.

According to a press release, their best practices include:

- Placing a lower emphasis on grades for recruiting. Bingham McCutchen looks beyond grades and also recruits at historically black law schools such as Howard University, according to the National Law Journal account of the findings. The firm's San Francisco office "is a magnet for top African American talent," according to the report (PDF posted by the Wall Street Journal Law Blog). The firm has informally evaluated the traits of its successful partners that go beyond academic achievement, and have found they include interpersonal and communications skills.
- Using political activism as a recruiting tool. Morrison & Foerster, which has a high percentage of Hispanic and gay lawyers, bolstered its reputation by raising funds in an effort to defeat a ban on gay marriage in California, and by its pro bono work in civil rights cases and for the gay community during the early days of the AIDS crisis.
- Providing senior-level mentors. "We found that relationships within the firm are extremely important in order for attorneys to get the right development opportunities and make it to the partnership level," Tina Paikeday told the National Law Journal. She is a principal with the consulting firm that conducted the study, the Talent Advisory Board Inc.
- Monitoring diversity levels, across the firm, in high-risk practice groups and in summer associate programs.

Law Blog highlights another finding: Morrison & Foerster is successful in retaining Hispanic lawyers partly because they aren't required to develop business early in their careers. According to the report, its partners believe "the ability to advance as a junior partner mitigates the need to develop business through external

relationships early in one's career, allowing time to build a reputation internally and externally."

Several firms also emphasized their process for distributing work so that there is a steady flow.

The law firms participating in the study were Bingham McCutchen; Fenwick & West; Littler Mendelson; Morrison & Foerster; Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe; Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman; and Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati.

Source: The American Bar Association Journal