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Interest in summer jobs at top firms cools down

High billable hours, attrition take toll.

Leigh Jones/Staff reporter
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Law student organizer
Andrew Canter

Tom Nosewicz interviewed with about 15 top law firms during Stanford Law School's recruiting season last fall. He heard promises of big money, engaging work and a shot at full-time employment once he completed his law degree.

"I did so many interviews it was sort of ridiculous. I felt like a salesman," said Nosewicz, who just finished his second year at Stanford.

Later this month, he'll head to New York to begin that summer job. But he has decided against filling a slot at one of the big firms that courted him last fall. Instead, he has taken a job without pay at the

federal defender's office, where he said he'll get "on-the-ground training" not available as a summer associate at a megafirm.

Nosewicz, 26, is part of a faction of law students at top schools whom associate-hungry law firms are salivating over, but who nevertheless are rejecting big firms' advances for what they say are more meaningful summer jobs.

Although the majority of law school graduates continue to take jobs in the private sector, the percentage of jobs at private firms — particularly large ones — has declined each year since the class of 2001. At the same time, the number of attorney jobs across all sectors has increased, according to NALP, a Washington-based nonprofit that tracks legal employment. In addition, the number of graduates has remained at about 40,000 for several years.

The upshot is that while the number of overall jobs taken has escalated by 12%, large-firm positions make up an increasingly smaller percentage of those jobs.

"Here's my sense: Many students are concerned about increasing billable-hour expectations and high attrition rates at large law firms," said Andrew Canter, co-founder of Law Students Building a Better Legal Profession. The organization of more than 100 law students from top schools last month called on big firms to reduce billable-hour requirements and implement balanced-life programs, at reduced pay to associates, if necessary. Canter also recently completed his second year at Stanford Law School.

"Firms can reach out to more top law students by addressing high attrition rates and setting sustainable billable expectations," he said.

Among students in the 2005 graduating class at law schools accredited by the American Bar Association, 55.8% went into private practice, NALP found. But among 2001 graduates, the percentage of jobs taken in private practice was 57.8%. The percentage of

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jobs accepted in firms with 101 attorneys or more has fallen from 42.6% in 2001 to 37.3% in 2005, while jobs at smaller firms of varying sizes went up modestly. Also increasing were jobs in the public interest sector, which grew from 2.9% in 2001 to 4.8% for the class of 2005, NALP found.

Ellen Wayne, dean of career services at Columbia Law School, points to a couple of factors contributing to the numbers. Many schools, including Columbia, now offer a stipend to students who take an internship with a nonprofit legal organization.

In addition, her school and others have mandatory pro bono requirements that students must complete for graduation. Those experiences often "light a fire" for students who then choose a public interest career path. Loan-repayment assistance programs also have prompted more students to enter that market.

Any decline in the percentage of big-firm jobs comes at a time when they are experiencing record results. Gross revenue at the nation's top law firms rose 13.4% last year, according to *The American Lawyer*, an affiliate of *The National Law Journal*. Meanwhile, firms have boosted starting salaries, which at many of the more prestigious ones come to \$160,000 plus bonuses. Undercutting the financial incentive, however, is the worsening reputation that big law firms have for associate dissatisfaction. According to NALP, by the time associates are in their fifth year of practice, nearly 80% of them have left large law firms.

"You can't pay me enough to be unhappy," said Amanda Marzullo, a student at the University of Pennsylvania Law School who recently finished her second year. This summer, she will be working at Kairys, Rudovsky, Epstein & Messing, a small criminal defense and civil rights firm in Philadelphia. As at Stanford, students at her school are highly recruited by big law firms.

Some 68.2% of the 450 students earning juris doctor degrees at University of Pennsylvania last year went to work for law firms included among *The National Law Journal's* 2006 survey of the nation's 250 largest law firms.

Marzullo, 28, interviewed with two large law firms last fall, but she remained determined to take a different path, despite having "moments" when the uncertainty of her future created stress, she said. Ultimately, she hopes to practice international law.

Nearly all of her friends have taken jobs at big firms, she said, most with plans to gain some experience with them full time and then move on after a few years.

"That just seems sort of tangential to what I want to do," she said. "Working for a firm is good experience if you want to work for a firm."

Before law school, Marzullo worked briefly as a paralegal at a large law firm. She felt as if she was working in a vacuum, she said, void of client contact. "You never see what's going on."

Susan Robinson, assistant dean for career services at Stanford Law School, said that while she has not seen a noticeable decline in the number of second-year students taking big-firm internships, she does get more inquiries from students considering alternatives. She also said that students who accept full-time jobs at large law firms are staying for a shorter duration.

"Ten years ago, you went to a firm and stayed three to four years. Now students are looking more in the one- to two-year time frame," Robinson said.

For Kaitlin Cordes, it is "really, really tempting" at Columbia Law School to sign on with a big firm for a summer associate job. She just finished her second year there. According to the 2006 NLJ 250 survey, among all ABA-accredited law schools, Columbia had the highest percentage of students — 69.6% — who took full-time jobs at NLJ 250 firms.

"All of my friends going to firms will make in one week what I'll make in the entire summer," said Cordes, 25.

Despite the temptation, she has accepted a summer job with the Brennan Center for Justice, a public policy and law institute.

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