



Bernice Davenport, Director of Career Services, Thomas M. Cooley Law School

[Barry Perlman]

As far as Bernice Davenport is concerned, students can't visit her office too much. As Director of Career Services at Thomas M. Cooley Law School, Davenport wants to see her students come back again and again so she can help them with their job searches. "I want them in my face. If they're in our faces, they become the ones at the top of our heads, who we think of first when we're talking to employers. And then we can say, 'I've got the perfect person for you.'"

Matching the right people with the right jobs is a talent Davenport has been developing since even before her eight-and-a-half-year tenure at Cooley. Prior to working at Cooley, she ran a child-care placement agency, where she listened to what clients were looking for and paired them with providers with the appropriate backgrounds. Thanks to that experience, the transition to career services in a law school was relatively smooth and easy, despite her lack of legal experience. "My opinion," Davenport says, "is I don't know that you must have a law degree to be a career advisor. You have to be able to interview, to sit down with people and talk with them, in order to advise them."

When she began at Cooley, Davenport did a lot of research and reading on the legal profession to supplement her non-legal education (she holds an MPA from Western Michigan University, one of Cooley's partner institutions). It's that same sort of work she expects students to do when they look for a career. "A lot of students don't want to do the research that is required. They think they can walk in and I'll hand them a job." Davenport quickly deflates that myth. "I tell them it's a partnership. We work together. Like in any relationship, there are parts I have to do and parts you have to do."

In counseling students, Davenport works to help them narrow their sights from a big-picture view to a more focused vision of what they would enjoy doing. "Students come in saying, 'I've always wanted to be a lawyer.' I catch them off guard by asking them, 'What does that mean?'" Many students also find themselves in law school by default, not

necessarily with a passion for a particular practice of law. "The economy plays a big part in more people coming to law school, wanting a graduate-level degree, and not having as many options." These students require more guidance, Davenport adds. "I ask them to consider what they like doing, what they like about law school, how they see themselves as lawyers."

The joke in her office, Davenport reports, is that all the students want to be international entertainment lawyers. "They tend to want to be where the glamour and the flash are, and make lots of money always, but don't we all?" In reality, many of the Cooley students Davenport advises end up in small or solo practices after graduation. She helps them reach that goal by outlining the smaller interim steps on the path to get there.

One of the most challenging parts of her job, Davenport admits, is the sheer number of students she is responsible for assisting at Cooley, the nation's largest JD law school program. "It's difficult when you have to deal with people more as quantities. You hope they also get the quality when you meet with them." Staffing two offices on the main Lansing campus and offices at each of the satellite branches in Rochester and Grand Rapids, Cooley's resources go largely toward serving walk-ins, making outreach to those who don't use independently choose to use Career Services more difficult. Davenport estimates her offices receive visits from only about 30% of the Cooley student body, but she'd love to see more. "I tell people, 'You pay for us to be here. Use your tuition dollars wisely and come to our office.'"

On the flip side, Davenport truly appreciates the diversity that comes along with such a large student body. "One thing I particularly like about Cooley is the unusually high number of second-career people. Among our students, I've met a neurosurgeon, a bank president, a pilot--a variety of people with diverse interests and career goals, and I really like that." Davenport sometimes has to get a bit more creative in packaging these students as attractive candidates for jobs. "We're talking about people who might have 10 or 15 years of professional expertise. I explain how valuable this can be to a firm, as opposed to someone who's never had that experience. It's all in how you market them."

Davenport also encourages job-hunting students to cast a broad net as to whom they speak regarding their search. "A few years back, I'd been working extensively with one student who was looking to move to a location he'd never planned on," Davenport recounts, "and after all the work we did together, he ended up talking to his neighbor, she gave him a contact, and he got the job. It made my job real easy!" As her story illustrates, there's often an element of surprise to the job search. That's why Davenport urges, "Tell everyone you're looking for a job. Tell people in the grocery store, in the doctor's office - so often it's who you know, and being in the right place at the right time."

A visit to the Career Services office doesn't hurt either. Ultimately, Davenport just wants students to give her office a chance, even if they've had a bad experience with career counseling in the past. "If one advisor



doesn't work out, try another." According to Davenport, she and her peers work hard to make their offices everything they can be, developing resources and establishing connections, and she really hopes students take advantage of what's there. "I suppose it would be a great world if we had nothing better to do than build an office - but it's for our students, and we want them to use it."