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Women topping law school ranks also lead summer hires

By Mary M. Byrne, Special to the Daily Report

OF THE 27 FIRMS THAT RESPONDED to the *Daily Report's* survey on summer associates, 19 reported recruiting a summer class with equal or higher numbers of women than men. The figures reflect a profession-wide trend toward hiring greater numbers of new female lawyers—and not just because women make up 50 percent or more of law school graduates.

"Just from talking to attorneys at other firms, we all have the distinct impression that women are disproportionately represented in the upper ranks of the classes in terms of their grades," says Lovita T. Tandy, a partner in the Atlanta office of King & Spalding and chair of the firm's Diversity Committee.

Recruiting talented women is not difficult, says Tandy. It's keeping them on board that's a challenge for the legal profession.

King & Spalding will host 22 women and 19 men in this year's summer class. Parker, Hudson, Rainer & Dobbs will bring 10 women and four men. And Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough; Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ceresi; Holland & Knight; and Seyfarth Shaw each are hosting at least three times as many women as men.

"I think we, all of the firms, are able to get really good talent. And then it's just an issue of making sure that there are processes and procedures in place to make sure women are succeeding in the firm," says Tandy.

At least 50 percent of law school graduates are women, but relatively few women manage to make partner at their firms—between 14 percent to 16 percent, says Susan Raridon Lambreth, a consultant on leadership, practice management and strategy for the Hildebrandt Institute.

One reason, she says, is that the traditional partnership track requires a woman to log intensive hours during the same years that might be her childrearing years.

Lambreth agrees that women now make up a majority of the higher-achieving ranks of law students. Since most firms hire based on academic credentials, she says, "Many times the women are among the best candidates they can hire."

The rising numbers of women—and minorities—in law schools will have "a huge impact on the profession, particularly when large law firms have done a pretty bad job of retaining women and minorities," says Lambreth.

At the same time, general counsel are putting increasing pressure on law firms—not just to hire more women and minorities, but also to promote them to positions of leadership.

On June 12, Hildebrandt will host a conference in New York City for law firm management on how to retain women. Called "Best Practices for Developing and Retaining Women Leaders in the Legal Profession," the conference will explore issues related to firm culture, compensation, governance and mentoring that may affect women's decisions to stay or go.

Lambreth warns that high grades and a law degree from a top-notch school do not necessarily guarantee a great lawyer. But as long as academic credentials guide the hiring process, she says, "If they [firms] don't retain more women, they're not going to keep the best and the brightest of the law schools at their firm."

In other words, says Tandy, retaining women is smart business, and young women lawyers are working the demographics to their advantage. She notes a guide called "The Cheat Sheet," released last year by Flex-Time Lawyers, a consulting firm that specializes in the retention and promotion of women lawyers.

The nine-page list of questions about leadership, workplace flexibility and mentoring, among other issues, bills itself as a "must-have tool" for female law students entering the interview process for their first job at a firm.

"I find it very interesting that women lawyers and women law students are ... taking the position that they have the most leverage in terms of finding out information and encouraging firms to change policies—when they're law students, versus when they're actually going to law firms," says Tandy.

Mary M. Byrne is a freelance writer.

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