



ADVICE FOR ASSESSING WHETHER A LAW FIRM VALUES DIVERSITY

By: Kasey Hemphill



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Diversity. This word has generated much buzz in recent years, and shows no signs of losing momentum. The social unrest in the wake of George Floyd's killing in May 2020 has prompted companies, even those that have not been vocal on these issues in the past, to openly advocate for anti-discriminatory policies and racial diversity.

But what does it really mean for an organization, such as a law firm, to value diversity? In this article, I share the steps that I took to find the right firm fit for me. Although there is no universal way to approach this question, I hope that these insights will be a starting point for your career search.

Before you consider any law firm, evaluate what is important to you. Thinking about the type of culture and environment in which you will be successful helps you identify which firms might align with your preferences. For me, it was critical to begin my legal career at a law firm taking concrete actions to hire and retain lawyers with diverse backgrounds. I recognized that diversity in the legal profession had not kept pace with demographics in our broader society. Nevertheless, I was adamant about joining a firm where I would find mentors that looked like me or shared some aspect of my background. I also wanted to practice at a firm that would solicit my viewpoints for recruiting diverse candidates, and take my input seriously.

Like many law students, I engaged in some preliminary research to identify law firms that seemed like possible fits. A necessary first step is visiting the law firm websites. I recommend browsing through all of the content on the site. There may be a page specifically for diversity and inclusion, but taking a look at the entire website often reveals whether diversity is captured in practice group leadership and in press releases or advocacy pieces. Some questions I asked myself were: What sounds real, quantifiable, and tangible about the firm's diversity efforts? Does the firm share a plan or strategic vision about their approach to increasing diversity? Are there any anecdotes, or other links or videos, capturing the voices of diverse attorneys?

Websites alone, however, do not fully capture a law firm's culture and initiatives. To get a better idea of what firm life was like, I decided to speak with people who had spent some time at the firms. Through my law school career center, and the affinity groups in which I was involved, I obtained information about the firms where law students spent their summers, or where graduates obtained employment. As I started interviewing, I reached out to fellow students who had spent summers at firms of interest, as well as recent graduates employed

as associates. These conversations helped me narrow the list of firms to those I was most excited about.

The interview stage allowed me to get a feel for whether I could picture myself at the particular firm. During my callback interview at Jones Day, the partners I spoke with were transparent about the firm's areas of growth for diversity and inclusion. A clear message was delivered: we need to do better, we are going to get better, and here is our plan. Responses that I received to my questions were authentic and thoughtful, without seeming scripted.

I encourage you to take advantage of the opportunity to ask questions during your interviews. It may seem intimidating to be in a room with profoundly accomplished lawyers. Try to remember that the interview is not one-sided. Use the interview to ask the questions that will help you understand the law firm's approach to diversity, beyond what is on the website or glossy brochures. Some questions you might ask include:

- What efforts has the firm taken to promote diverse lawyers? What new steps does the firm plan on taking in the next several years to increase these efforts?
- Does the firm partner with pipeline organizations to increase high school and college students' awareness of law firm career opportunities?
- How does the firm ensure that case teams are diverse?

After researching, reaching out to former summer associates and lawyers in the firm, and gathering information during interviews, the next step might be preparing for a summer associate position. These programs differ at every firm, but whether a firm places a genuine emphasis on diversity should become clear regardless where you spend your summer. A law firm that values diversity will provide numerous opportunities for mentorship and community engagement. The Jones Day summer program allowed me to connect with lawyers across multiple offices that have become mentors and advocates. I also had the opportunity to assist with several pro bono matters involving asylum and education, two areas of keen interest to me. After a 10-week 1L program, I was so confident I made the right choice in law firms that I canceled my on-campus interviews and accepted an offer to come back to Jones Day for a second summer.

From the moment I interviewed, my instincts told me I would feel welcomed and included at Jones Day. I have been proven right thus far. Shortly after my callback interview, I was put in contact with the Partner-in-Charge of Diversity, Inclusion and Advancement, Yvette McGee Brown. Yvette immediately took me under her wing and has remained a close mentor of mine. While practicing, I have had numerous opportunities to assist with law student recruitment efforts and pipeline programs serving diverse high school students. And when the events of this past summer left me shaken and uncertain whether my life mattered, I had several colleagues I could call and lean on.

Above all else, the most important component of the career search process is trusting your intuition. A law firm might be a "work in progress" when it comes to diversity, but if the leadership shows you that they are willing to improve, and invites you to collaborate in achieving improvements, you probably are in the right place. And I have found that at Jones Day.

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