

Don't Shoot the Messenger: Communicating with Law Students in Times of Uncertainty



2021 NALP Annual Education Conference Panel Discussion

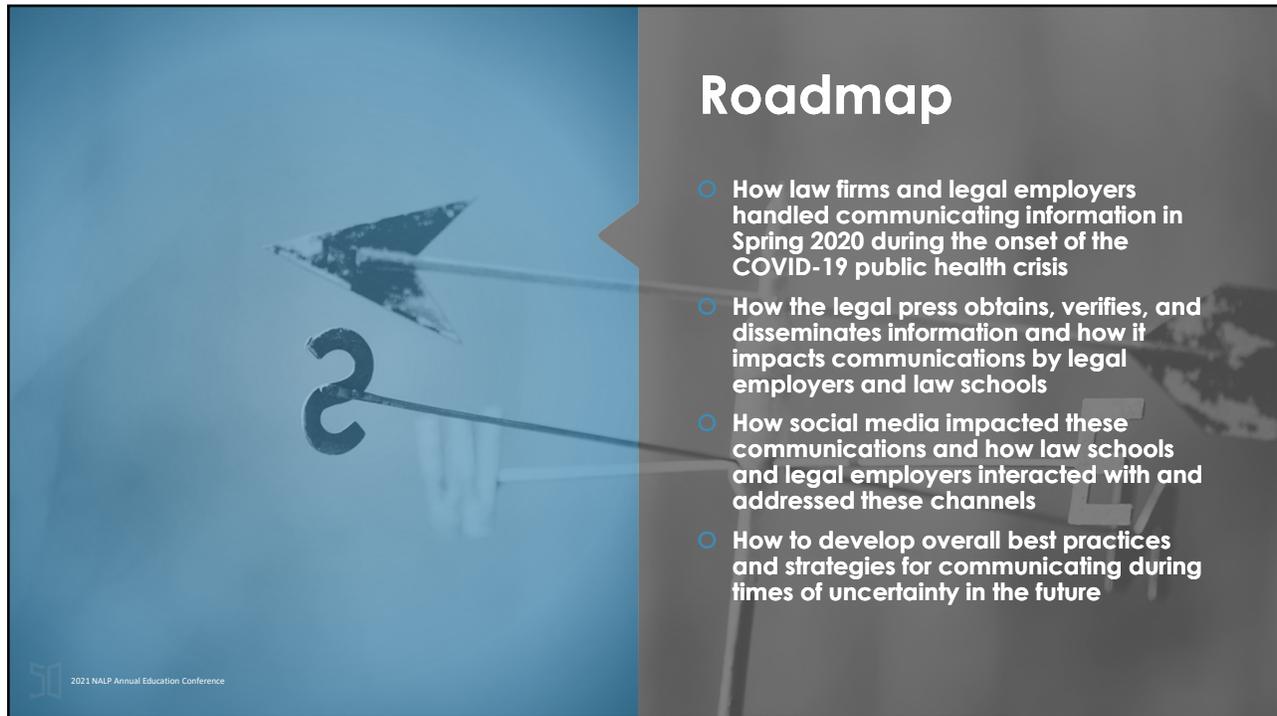
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Introduction of Panelists

Moderator	Panelist	Panelist	Panelist
<p>Susanna Brennan (she/her/hers)</p> <p>Manager of Attorney Recruiting</p> <p>Miller Canfield</p> <p>brennans@millercanfield.com</p>	<p>Debbie Atlas (she/her/hers)</p> <p>Director of Attorney Recruiting</p> <p>Ice Miller</p> <p>debbie.atlas@icemiller.com</p>	<p>Karen Sloan (she/her/hers)</p> <p>Legal Education Editor and Senior Writer</p> <p>ALM</p> <p>ksloan@alm.com</p>	<p>Melanie Rowen (she/her/hers)</p> <p>Associate Director for Public Interest / Public Sector Programs</p> <p>Berkeley Law</p> <p>mrowen@berkeley.edu</p>

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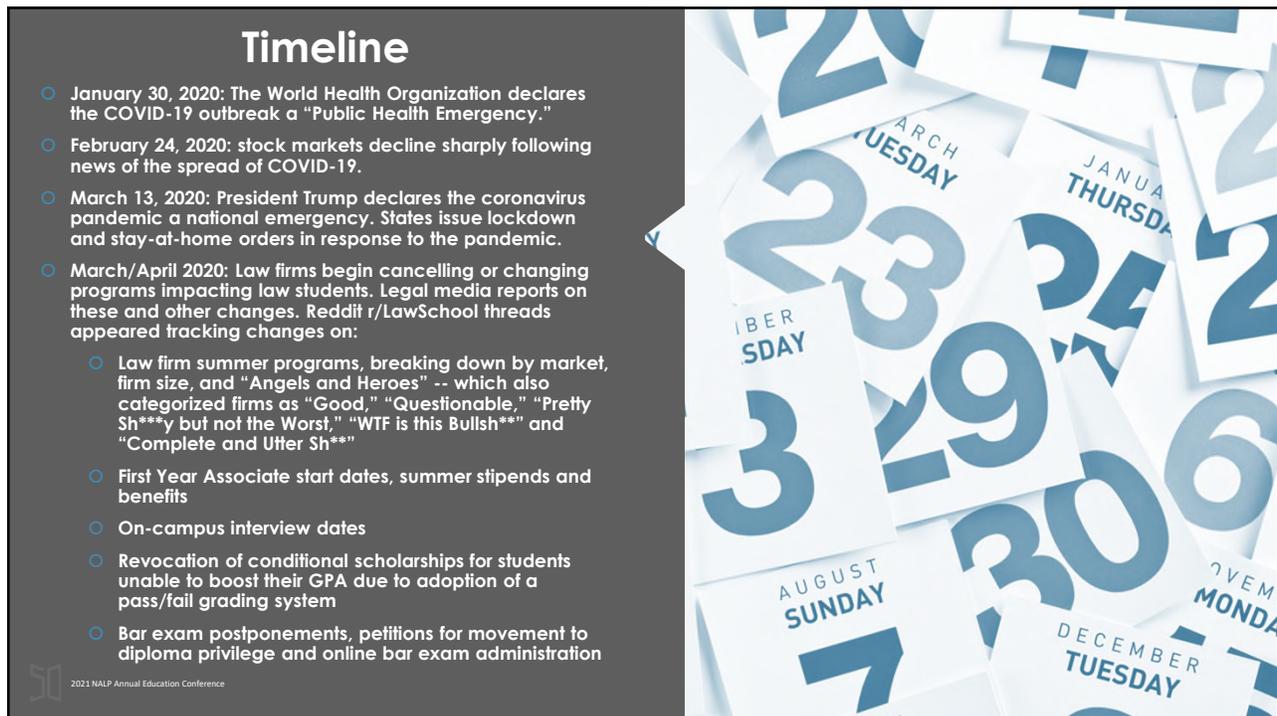


Roadmap

- How law firms and legal employers handled communicating information in Spring 2020 during the onset of the COVID-19 public health crisis
- How the legal press obtains, verifies, and disseminates information and how it impacts communications by legal employers and law schools
- How social media impacted these communications and how law schools and legal employers interacted with and addressed these channels
- How to develop overall best practices and strategies for communicating during times of uncertainty in the future

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Timeline

- January 30, 2020: The World Health Organization declares the COVID-19 outbreak a "Public Health Emergency."
- February 24, 2020: stock markets decline sharply following news of the spread of COVID-19.
- March 13, 2020: President Trump declares the coronavirus pandemic a national emergency. States issue lockdown and stay-at-home orders in response to the pandemic.
- March/April 2020: Law firms begin cancelling or changing programs impacting law students. Legal media reports on these and other changes. Reddit r/LawSchool threads appeared tracking changes on:
 - Law firm summer programs, breaking down by market, firm size, and "Angels and Heroes" -- which also categorized firms as "Good," "Questionable," "Pretty Sh***y but not the Worst," "WTF is this Bullsh**" and "Complete and Utter Sh**"
 - First Year Associate start dates, summer stipends and benefits
 - On-campus interview dates
 - Revocation of conditional scholarships for students unable to boost their GPA due to adoption of a pass/fail grading system
 - Bar exam postponements, petitions for movement to diploma privilege and online bar exam administration

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Questions? Further discussion? Contact us!

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Best Practices and Strategies*

Step 1: Create a Team for Centralized Communication

Put together a small team that can move nimbly. It could be comprised of the Hiring Chair or Managing Partner, Manager of Attorney Recruiting, HR, and Communications. The goals of the team should be to:

1. Meet regularly to monitor the situation as it evolves
2. Be the only source of information internally and externally
3. Give regular updates to students, schools, internally, etc.
4. Be as transparent as possible
5. If significant changes need to be made, provide messages personally by phone before following up with written confirmation
6. Be succinct in written communications

Step 2: Communicate Regularly

If students aren't informed and don't understand what's going on, communications outside the organization will be more difficult. Information (and misinformation) will rush in to fill in the vacuum. Frequent communication reduces fear and uncertainty and ensures that people have heard the message. Although this can be fatiguing, remember that especially in times of high stress, people may need to hear messages multiple times, in different ways and through different channels.

Suggested strategies:

1. Post or discuss information regularly in a highly visible location: in-person, virtual town hall, e-mail, social media channels.
2. Have a plan for how often to communicate: once a week, bi-weekly, once a month.
3. Try to provide timely information rather than waiting until you know all the answers.
4. Be empathetic: this could be the first time younger generations have been exposed to a crisis and are experiencing multiple changes at once, such as remote schooling, loss of childcare, illness, isolation, revocation of scholarships or other financial strain.
5. Emphasize resilience: remind students that this will prepare them as lawyers to help their clients in their times of crisis.
6. Provide a safe channel for questions or feedback: in-person, phone, video chat, or small group discussions.
7. Address concerns about job security: if you are cancelling or changing your Summer program, let students know as soon as possible so they can plan accordingly.

Step 3: Be Proactive

1. Remember that students aren't the only ones reading social media posts or press articles: clients, shareholders of client organizations, community members, employees, and competitors are too.
2. Share information with the schools at the same time that you're sharing them with students, since they are fielding questions from students and are sometimes the last to know.
3. Provide information to the legal media directly to get ahead of the message and emphasize the credibility of your organization.
4. Be vigilant in correcting mistakes without worrying about the repercussions.
5. Provide relief where possible, e.g., health benefits, stipend, training, assistance in finding other positions.
6. Share as much as you can about strategy and planning for the future: "If this happens again, we would..."

*Adapted from [Communicating Through the Coronavirus Crisis \(hbr.org\)](#) and [5 Tips for Communicating with Employees During a Crisis \(hbr.org\)](#)