

SMU Dedman Law Steps Up with Test Drive

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Zach Burd was attending an Inn of Court meeting this spring when he overheard a lawyer say she and her partners were “up to our eyeballs with work.” As a member of the SMU Dedman School of Law Class of 2010, Burd immediately saw an opportunity for work upon graduation.

The lawyer told Zach that she needed help, but that she felt like she should be very cautious about hiring new lawyers due to the tough economic times.

Only a few weeks later, Zach was one of scores of students attending a luncheon program where the Office of Career Services unveiled a creative new initiative in which SMU Dedman Law would pay a significant portion of the graduate’s first month salary on a “no strings attached basis”, and a second month’s salary if the employer and the graduate believed the effort would lead to a full-time, long-term position.

“I had no job offers, but I immediately saw this as a tremendous opportunity to get my foot in the door,” says Burd. “I called the lawyer right away with the information. This program was the key to me getting this job.”

Burd landed his full-time, permanent position through this new, highly innovative effort created exclusively by SMU Dedman Law called “Test Drive.” He is one of six SMU Dedman Law 2010 graduates whose Test Drive resulted in full-time, permanent employment within one month after taking the bar in July. As of September, twenty-five SMU Dedman Law 2010 graduates have secured Test Drive jobs since the program was launched in mid-May. Graduates have until December 31 to secure a Test Drive and have until the end of February to complete their Test Drive employment.

Test Drive is designed to empower SMU Dedman Law graduates and give them an advantage in a very tough economic environment. The program encourages law firms struggling with the decision of hiring an additional associate to take a stronger look at graduates of the Class of 2010 by offering a financial incentive to help offset the cost. If a law firm agrees to give a new graduate a test drive, SMU will cover up to \$3,500 of the first month’s salary. The law school also will consider funding a second month if the graduate and law firm agree that it will lead to full-time employment. If the law firm decides after the first month that it cannot offer the graduate permanent employment, there is no further obligation by the firm or the graduate.

“We recognized that many students were very concerned about the job market for new lawyers and were looking to the law school for assistance,” says Assistant Dean Karen C.

Sargent, who leads the Office of Career Services. “We understood that law firms were going to be extraordinarily cautious about hiring this fall and winter.”

Dean John Attanasio structured Test Drive to provide the Class of 2010 with financial leverage to help them seek positions with firms. “Our goal is to be proactive and creative in helping our graduates obtain jobs that align with their career goals,” says Dean Attanasio. “This is a wise investment in our graduates – an investment that can do nothing but benefit SMU Dedman Law in the long-term.”

Sargent says graduates are provided with marketing materials explaining Test Drive, which they can then utilize to target legal employers with whom they desire to work. The result has significantly increased the self-confidence of graduates as they approach potential employers who may be unsure about adding an associate.

Evan O’Donnell, a member of the Class of 2010, met with lawyers at Greenville, Texas-based Scott, Money & Ray about a possible first year position. But the firm was hesitant because of the cost associated with adding a new lawyer.

“The Test Drive program allowed the firm to see my work and to take me for a test drive,” says O’Donnell. “It gave the firm some cushion on the finances. Without Test Drive, I am not sure I would have gotten this job.”

Test Drive was the second groundbreaking career development initiative implemented by SMU Dedman Law this year. In February, the law school created “Partner to Practice,” which helped law firms and corporations offset the cost of hiring second year law students for summer clerkships. Under Partner to Practice, SMU Dedman agreed to cover half of the payments for summer associates up to \$500 a week with a maximum of \$3,500. The law school awarded the funds to the students in the form of tuition remission for the 2010-2011 academic year. Partner to Practice was a huge success. Within six weeks more than sixty-five clerkships and internships were posted for second year students and ultimately eighty-eight Partner to Practice opportunities were created resulting in seventy-six jobs.

“We recognize that, as a law school, we must be innovative in developing pioneering concepts that provide our students and graduates with the tools and leverage they need to succeed,” says Attanasio.