Assistant Deans Take on New
Baum, Zearfoss tackle professional skills, professional strategies

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Recent changes in the legal hiring market haven’t caused a decline in the number of highly qualified candidates vying for admission to top-tier law schools. Quite the opposite, in fact – at Michigan Law, for example, this year saw a near 20% increase in applications, and from a stronger applicant pool than ever.

Behind the school’s appeal, of course, is one of the great benefits of attending Michigan Law: a Michigan degree translates into abundant career opportunities. And the changed hiring climate has made faculty members and administrators more determined than ever to stay ahead of the curve in preparing students for continued success. That’s why Dean Evan Caminker has extended the job responsibilities of two of the Law School’s senior administrators. Sarah Zearfoss, a 1992 graduate who for the last decade has served as the School’s assistant dean for admissions, takes on an additional role this fall as Special Counsel for Professional Strategies. And Assistant Dean for Student Affairs David Baum, a 1989 graduate, has been named to the additional position of Special Counsel for Professional Skills Development. The two new positions reflect a stem-to-stern approach to the legal education process, from admission to career placement. Baum and Zearfoss will work together to help tailor Michigan Law’s academic and other programs to maintain Michigan’s academic excellence while ensuring graduates are even better prepared for professional practice. Zearfoss found a few moments recently to answer several questions about her new role.

Q: Give us a thumbnail description, please, of your new duties.

A: I’ll be guiding the strategy of the Career Services and Public Service offices in bringing a consistent approach from the first day of classes to placement in a job after graduation. More than most administrative positions, the external focus of Admissions has always required some degree of long-term strategic thinking, and Dean Caminker thought it would be useful to bring my expertise and perspective to bear on Career Services and Public Service, too. And of course the central question in admissions has always been what type of student will do best in the environment, both in school and, later on, in the workplace—that too provides an incredibly useful perspective for this undertaking.
Q: Why does this change make sense right now?

A: People have always been interested in law school because it’s a gateway to a great career, but the prospective students’ focus on career outcomes has increased dramatically since the economic downturn. More and more prospective students are making law school choices based on career motivations, so it’s really important right now to have one person looking at the entire law school experience with that eye. In admissions, we develop an outsider’s perspective on the school. And that perspective positions me well to work closely with these other offices to rethink and fine-tune our approach.

Q: What are some of the components of that strategic thinking?

A: There’s a curricular aspect, certainly – how do we best prepare our students for outstanding careers in a rapidly changing field? How do we provide the richest, most diverse portfolio of opportunities for students to build their skills? But there’s also a strong career-advising component: increasingly, we need to move beyond the bread & butter of advising about applying for jobs to guiding students about their curricular and extracurricular choices and how to position themselves for their careers in the long term. We need to be asking what are students seeking from a law school in terms of counseling and advising? What services do we need to be providing? How best can we present students with information about their options? Bottom-line, it is crucial for our students to begin considering legal career paths early in their law school careers, so that they can effectively identify and build necessary skills. We are committed to empowering them to taking charge of their career decision-making in an informed and affirmative way.

Q: How beneficial is it for potential employers to have someone in admissions who is keenly attuned to the needs of real employers?

A: We’ve always looked for smart people, but some schools might look for brainy people in the abstract – people who won’t necessarily have great lawyerly skill sets. But we’re committed to good lawyering – finding students who can work well with clients. This change in our internal structure puts a special new focus on that, and should help us continue to take advantage of our strengths.

*Check out more of Sarah Zearfoss’ ideas on her A2Z blog, at http://www.law.umich.edu/connection/a2z/default.aspx.*