

## These Firms Won Over Their Summer Associates

By Justin Wise

*Law360 (September 27, 2021, 10:25 AM EDT)* -- 2021 marked the second consecutive year in which summer associate programs took place during a pandemic, forcing some firms to again conduct them completely virtually. But despite those obstacles, law firms generally earned high marks from participants, according to a new Law360 Pulse poll of summer associates.

An overwhelming majority of the 751 law school students who participated in Law360's post-program Summer Associates Survey said they felt well-positioned to prove themselves in a fair and balanced way during their associateship. Most also said their firms provided them with ample opportunities for networking and mentorship and that their experiences left them confident to start a career in law.

### My Summer Experience



The responses indicate that the programs continue to offer valuable training and connections to law students, even as the pandemic has upended how firms operate.

Morrison & Foerster LLP took the top spot as the firm that left associates feeling the best about their mentoring and training opportunities, according to an informal ranking based on responses to questions about career development, networking opportunities, developing skills and firms' ability to conduct their summer programs during a pandemic.

Following right behind were Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP, Goulston & Storrs PC and Paul Hastings LLP. The ranking is based on scores before rounding, and firms had to meet a threshold of five survey participants to make the list.

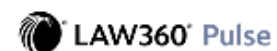
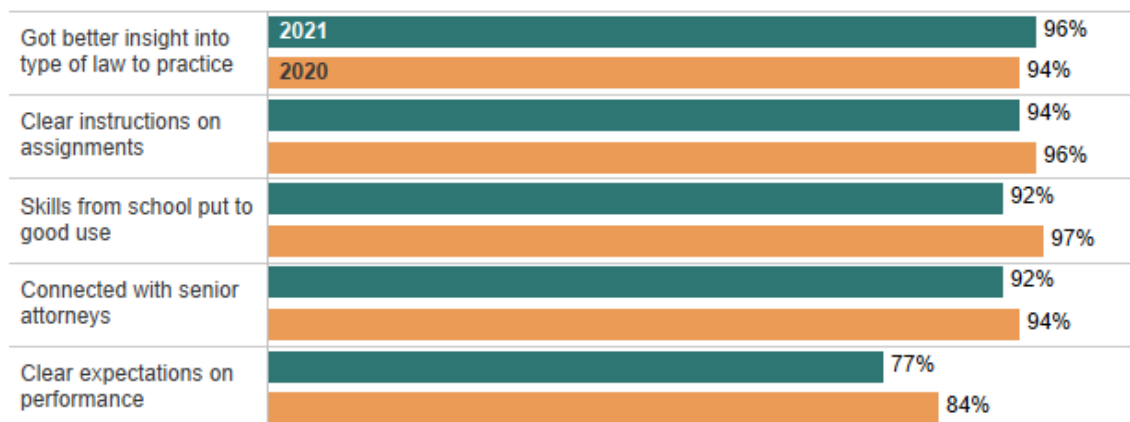
### These Firms Are the Summer Winners

These 15 firms earned top marks from students for their summer associate experience.

RANK	FIRM	SCORE	RANK	FIRM	SCORE
1	Morrison & Foerster	4.94	9	Troutman Pepper	4.79
2	Cleary	4.9	10	Akin Gump	4.77
3	Goulston & Storrs	4.85	11	Foley & Lardner	4.72
4	Paul Hastings	4.84	12	Vinson & Elkins	4.7
5	Morgan Lewis	4.83	13	Katten	4.7
6	Davis Polk	4.82	14	Mayer Brown	4.69
6	Sheppard Mullin	4.82	15	Skadden	4.69
8	Arnold & Porter	4.8			

## Summer Associateships Get High Marks

Firms did slightly better last year, with hugely positive results.



A near consensus emerged from the survey that firms put together as good a summer associate

program as they could given the circumstances. Ninety-six percent of respondents said the experience gave them better insight into the kind of law they want to practice. And more than 90% of respondents said they were able to connect with senior attorneys, which appears to partly be a reflection of how effective virtual and hybrid programs have been.

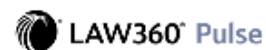
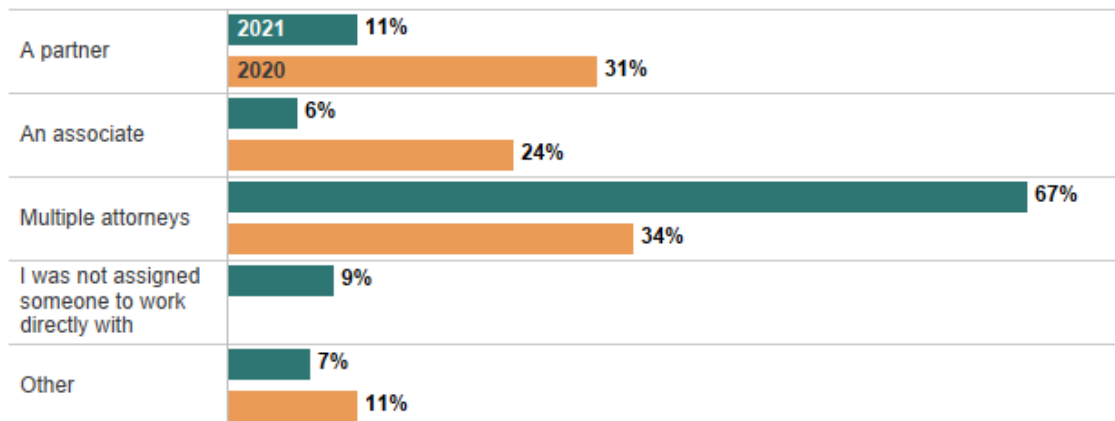
Summer associate programs typically last around 10 weeks and are run by firms as part of an effort to develop and integrate law students soon to be entering the profession. The pandemic altered how many of those programs are managed, though, with many firms in 2020 cutting their length and conducting them virtually. Some nixed the programs altogether last year.

In year two of the pandemic, firms adopted a mixture of policies for running their associate programs, as COVID-19 cases began to recede in parts of the U.S., the Law360 Pulse survey found. Associate programs generally took place before a resurgence in infections associated with the delta variant led to renewed concerns about the safety of returning to the office.

Although firms were fairly evenly split in their requirements, the smallest portion — 27% — required associates to attend completely in person. Thirty-nine percent of respondents said their program remained completely remote, while 34% said it was conducted partially in person.

## Connecting Through the Pandemic

This year, only 11% of summers said they were assigned to work directly with a partner, compared with 31% in 2020.



The programs' duration also generally returned to their pre-pandemic length, with a majority saying theirs lasted 10 weeks.

At Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP, the use of virtual programs has exposed associates to a "greater variety of lawyers across the offices," said chief legal talent officer Beth Miller.

Akin Gump implemented firmwide training programs during the pandemic, which she said cut down geographic constraints and gave associates novel opportunities to connect with peers and attorneys in different regions. What's more, a greater number of attorneys have participated in virtual events connected to the program, which lasted 10 weeks and was conducted mostly virtually this year.

"It's been a welcome surprise," Miller said.

The firm's 2021 summer associates were also able, once again, to take on client work, which had been cut last year after Akin Gump reduced the program's length to five weeks.

Surprisingly, given the extreme pressure firms were under in 2020 to carry through with their programs amid widespread court and business closures, a noticeably lower percentage of respondents reported being assigned to work directly with a partner this year — 11% compared with 31% in 2020. But this drop was counterbalanced by a notable year-over-year jump in the percentage of respondents who said they were assigned multiple members of the firm to work with directly — 67%, compared with just 34% in 2020.

Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP chief recruiting officer John O'Hara said that last year the firm learned that "the biggest contributor to a successful summer is the number of connections we can enable [summer associates] to make." While connecting in-person is ideal, he said, it doesn't mean meaningful interactions can't take place over a computer screen.

This year's program was partially in-person, O'Hara said, but the lessons learned from 2020 continued to have an impact. The firm has implemented more regular check-ins between attorneys and associates and introduced firmwide trainings and presentations hosted over videoconference.

Gibson Dunn also hosted virtual coffee chats and affinity group gatherings in an attempt to virtually reproduce the connections that may happen more informally in an off

"Last year taught us how to make sure people are making connections even if they are not in the office every day," he said.

The discovery speaks to the power that tools like Zoom have had for law firms the past 18 months.

Zoom was "just something we didn't do before the pandemic," said Arnold & Porter co-managing partner Ellen Fleishhacker, who helps oversee the firm's summer associate program, adding that it will remain a permanent feature of its programs in the future.

Survey respondents reported being trained in a wide swath of software, with the most common being time and billing programs and document management programs, at 84% and 82%, respectively. Roughly a third said they had the opportunity to accompany attorneys to hearings and depositions. Even so, 43% said they received no courtroom experience.

The generally positive experiences didn't come without problems. Hiring assurances are down, with only 55% of respondents saying they'd been given an assurance, compared to 74% last year. And respondents voiced complaints with their programs in several areas, from the expectations around in-office work, to a firm's exclusive culture, to how management communicated its hiring plans.

"I wish [my firm] had stuck to their word when they told us it would be a virtual program," one said. "We were told there was no pressure to come into the office or attend in-person events, and that these would not be evaluated, but I felt there was an implicit pressure that made me uncomfortable, given that I had planned for a virtual summer [and] didn't move to the city where my job was located."

Another chided a firm for reneging on a promise of a job offer a month later, saying the firm should "stop your disrespectful practices."

While just a slim majority of respondents said they received hiring assurances, firms that spoke with

Law360 Pulse noted that, while they may not make formal guarantees, their goal is to hire the people entering their programs.

"Our attitude is, we want you to succeed and come back," O'Hara of Gibson Dunn said. "We don't guarantee, but our offer rates are pretty close to 100%."

Firms remain optimistic that health conditions will allow for a safe return to fully in-person programs next year. After all, it's hard to replicate the everyday office environment, where associates can pop by someone's desk or go out to lunch with peers and mentors, said Amanda Leslie, director of attorney recruiting at Arnold & Porter.

"It's sometimes difficult to be on Zoom a lot," Leslie said. "People generally are looking for ways to operate outside of the screen."

--Editing by Pamela Wilkinson, Kerry Benn, John Campbell, Rachel Reimer and Sam Bell. Graphics by Chris Yates.

*Methodology: Law360 Pulse conducted the second part of the Summer Associates Survey from June 29 to Aug. 9, 2021. We received 751 responses from 1L-3L year law students, requiring them to identify the organization where they are completing their summer associateship. The survey was anonymous and will not connect any individual response with any person. The first part of the survey, which focused on the summer associateship application process and on-campus interviews, was conducted from March 9 to April 2, 2021.*