Fall interviewing season is stressful. Thinking about offers and decisions may seem like the least of your worries — and yet how and when you respond to offers makes a tremendous difference. You could even lose an offer if you don’t understand how soon you need to reaffirm your interest. Equally important, your professionalism in responding to offers sets the tone for your relationship with employers who have expressed an interest in you. But what should that professionalism include? And what are all those “NALP timing guidelines” or “Principles and Standards for the Timing of Offers and Decisions” your career services office keeps talking about?

Here are a few of the questions law students most often ask about these ethical standards. These answers provide you with a quick guide to the essentials of navigating the fall interviewing season with professionalism.

**What are the NALP timing guidelines and why are they important?**

Virtually all ABA-accredited law schools and most of the largest legal employers of lawyers in the United States (large law firms, governmental agencies, and some corporations and public service organizations) belong to the National Association for Law Placement (NALP). One of the fundamental reasons NALP was formed in 1971 was to promote fairness and informed decision-making during the recruitment process. Together, the law schools and employers belonging to NALP have developed and agreed to abide by the “NALP Principles and Standards,” a set of guidelines that offers an ethical framework for all participants in the recruiting process.

Under the NALP timing guidelines, employers are required to leave offers open for specified lengths of time to allow you to complete your interviewing schedule and make an informed decision about this important first step in your legal career. You also have certain ethical responsibilities affecting such areas as response dates and how many offers you can hold.

**What, exactly, are the dates by which I have to respond to offers?**

The NALP timing guidelines specify the following dates by which you are expected to accept or release offers or negotiate an extension. (Be sure you also understand the answers to the following additional questions about how many offers you can hold, when you might consider negotiating an extension, why you need to reaffirm your interest, and when employers are permitted to require earlier responses.)

- For firms at which you were previously employed and from which you received an offer before September 15, your decision is required by **November 1**.
- For firms at which you were previously employed and from which an offer is received on or after September 15, your decision is required by **December 1**.
- If you receive an offer from a firm at which you were not previously employed, you have until **December 1** to respond.

**Do NALP’s timing guidelines ever allow employers to require my decision sooner?**

First, it is important to note that the NALP guidelines were formulated specifically to promote fairness amid the pressures of the fall interviewing season. When offers are made at other times of the year and when offers are made less than two weeks prior to December 1, the NALP guidelines simply state that the offers should remain open for at least two weeks after the date made.

Second, the NALP timing guidelines state that employers with 40 or fewer attorneys in all offices are required to keep offers open for at least three weeks but are not required to abide by the November 1/December 1 timelines. Because smaller employers generally cannot forecast their hiring needs a year in advance and must staff their
offices as needs arise, they are less likely to participate in fall interviewing, but you should be aware of this provision.

**Do the timelines ever permit an employer to retract an offer?**

The NALP guidelines state that students should reaffirm their interest in an offer within 30 days of the date of an offer letter. An employer may retract an offer you do not reaffirm within 30 days whether or not the offer letter states that reaffirmation is required. This provision helps to ensure that employers are not hindered in the hiring process — and that other students are not prevented from receiving offers — because offers are being held open for students who have no interest in accepting.

**How many offers can I consider at once?**

After September 15, you should not hold open more than five offers of employment at one time; after October 1, you should not hold open more than four offers simultaneously; and after October 15, you should not hold open more than three offers at one time, including offers received as a result of previous summer employment. If you receive an offer that places you over the limit, you should, within one week of receipt of the excess offer, release one offer.

This is one of the most important provisions of the NALP guidelines. How would you feel if you knew that you had not yet received an offer because another student was holding six offers? If you hold excess offers you are preventing employers from extending those offers on a timely basis to others in their pool of candidates.

If you are genuinely having trouble deciding among a number of employers, ask yourself why. Do you need to do further research on the employers? Should you have another conversation with one or more of your contacts at a firm? Do you need to revisit a firm to be sure it’s right for you? While you should be cautious about assuming employers will be willing or able to pay for endless visits, you will find that employers are anxious to facilitate your decision-making process and to help you determine whether they are the right “fit.”

Some students hesitate to reject an offer — even when it is clearly not of interest — because they are reluctant to “break the bad news” to an employer. As sorry as employers might be to receive your rejection, they will respect your professionalism — and your awareness of their firms’ interests — if you reject on a timely basis and do so by phone or email (not “snail mail”). Employers need to be able to extend new offers as promptly as possible, and there are other students waiting and hoping to receive those offers.

**What if I need more time to decide?**

The NALP guidelines state that “second- and third-year students may, with the consent of the employer, extend one offer beyond December 1.” In addition, for offers for which November 1 is the timeline, the guidelines state: “Upon request by the student, an employer should extend this date until December 1 upon receipt of assurances from the student that he or she is holding and will hold no more than one other offer during the extension period.”

Again, professionalism should govern any requests for extensions of time. Employers need to know whether they have met their hiring needs. Consider requesting an extension beyond December 1 only when there is a compelling reason to do so — e.g., you are also pursuing an opportunity with a public interest organization or another employer unable to complete interviewing in the fall, or your decision is affected by the plans of your “significant other.” (NALP has developed “Interpretations” of the Principles and Standards that encourage employers to grant extensions in these two particular cases, but keep in mind that the Interpretations are not requirements.)

**What if the employer I am interviewing with is not a NALP member or is not abiding by the NALP guidelines?**

Compliance with the NALP Principles and Standards is voluntary. However, most NALP member employers and most law schools do take the Principles and Standards seriously because they respect the need for ethical guidelines to promote fairness in the interviewing and offer process. Violations of the NALP guidelines should be reported to your career services office.

**How can I learn more?**

See [www.nalp.org](http://www.nalp.org) for:

- For a helpful summary chart of the timelines for decisions.
- For the full text of the Principles and Standards and also suggested Interpretations.
- For links to articles about the effects of the new judicial clerkship hiring timelines on other hiring timelines.