



Will Work for ... Well, Anything at This Point

An unemployed 3L's firsthand account of the increasingly depressing job market and her advice to current and future law students.

BY HEATHER VENRICK

MY NAME IS HEATHER VENRICK, AND I AM A 3L AT SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY DEDMAN SCHOOL OF LAW.

I am in the top third of my class. I am on law review. I have held leadership positions in a number of organizations, including the SMU Law Board of Advocates, the Women in Law and Association for Public Interest Law student organizations, and the State Bar of Texas Law Student Division. I have participated in five national moot court teams. I have interned with a federal judge. I have clerked with four different small- to mid-sized firms. I have experience in civil and criminal, public and private, and in-house and outside counsel.

I am still looking for permanent employment.

And I am not the only one. So many students with similar and, perhaps, even better credentials are in the same situation, wondering the same thing: what else can I do?

The truth is disappointing.

People tell me that the job market is “getting better” and “was worse a few years ago.” This is both hopeful and infuriating. While it is encouraging to know that others have braved tumultuous storms and come out the other side employed, it is upsetting that some institutions cling to the days when every firm had a clerkship program and hired new associates from that program.

From the second I entered law school, career advisers bombarded me with advice: get good grades, get on law review, participate in advocacy competitions, diversify your legal experiences, and have leadership roles in organizations. I was led to believe this would help me secure a 2L clerkship with a good firm and that I would be offered a position at the end of that clerkship.

There were days when every firm had a summer clerkship program and hired exclusively from that clerkship program. But those days are long, long gone. More and more firms are abandoning clerkship programs. Or worse, some firms have clerkship programs but are then unable to hire from the clerkship class because the firm incorrectly anticipated its own needs and resources.

Well-established institutions do not change quickly, so the clerkship system may never change. But what can change is how law schools and mentors discuss the legal market with their students. Rather than give them rose-colored glasses at 1L orientation, inoculate them to the realities of the market from the beginning. The realities are: (1) a handful will have six-figure salaries; (2) many will find a job that does not pay enough to cover their loan payments (there are attorneys hiring associates in

Dallas for as little as \$24,000); (3) several will take jobs that do not require a law license; and (4) some will get to practice in their preferred area for a median \$50,000.

This is the legal market. We do not need to protect new students from it. We need to be honest about it. I do not agree with the current trend of discouraging everyone from going to law school, but schools should start being more open about the market and job prospects, and should provide realistic income expectations from the beginning. I realize that schools shy away from the truth because it is not very good for business—no one wants to be the “Killer of Dreams.” But being the “Creator of False Hope” is no better.

I feel sorry for those poor souls who go to law school simply for dollar signs. To those of you considering the law, I beg you: please do not do it for the money. Do it because something else drives you to.

First-year students do not need to be treated with kid gloves. Tell us that we face long odds to secure the type of life we thought a J.D. guaranteed, but that it does not make the practice of law any less fulfilling. Give us the knowledge to make the best decisions we can, because right now, students choosing to enter law school are doing so with the odds stacked against them. Give us the necessary facts so that we can make informed choices and be fully prepared for life after law school.

Yes, you will be rejected. Be upset. And then try to get over it.

I could tell you how upsetting it is to be rejected by a firm that you have worked so hard to impress. I could cry about how my confidence was shattered and my faith in myself was shot. But that is futile. The real point is that everyone has been punched in the mouth by rejection at one time or another. The challenge— cliché, but nonetheless true—is learning from it.

Law school is a blend of awesome and awful—the law is awesome; the constant tests on your confidence are quite awful. Law school challenges your self-conviction like nothing has before. If you are in law school, you are smart, ambitious, and driven—characteristics seldom associated with rejection. Unfortunately, rejection in law school is inevitable and happens to almost everyone.

Please do not take it personally. This is supremely difficult. It took me quite some time—and a few pep talks from my fiancé—to finally understand that it truly is not personal. Keep this in the forefront of your mind when you start receiving those rejection letters.

Do not come to law school just because you want to make money.

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simply for dollar signs. To those of you considering the law, I beg you: please do not do it for the money. Do it because something else drives you to.

Had I known just how hard it would be to find employment, I absolutely would have made the same decision. I want to be a lawyer. I love learning the law, I love the chess game that litigation can be, and I love advocacy. But I wish my advisers had been more straightforward with me about job prospects and loan repayment. I wish I had prepared myself sooner for the inevitable rejection. Most important, I wish I hadn't listened to people telling me how much money I was going to make as an attorney. Though the prospect of making a decent

income was not a determinative factor, it certainly helped me feel more secure about my decisions, especially when applying for those wonderful loans.

I am excited and ready to be an attorney, even if that means hanging out my own shingle somewhere. I recommend you go to law school only if you feel the same. **TBJ**

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