



The Learning Curve

What you need to know to make the most of law school.



BY VICTOR VILLARREAL



THE TEXAS YOUNG LAWYERS ASSOCIATION PROJECT *WHAT DO LAWYERS DO?* FAMILIARIZES HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH, AND EXPLAINS, THE LAW SCHOOL PROCESS.

All lawyers have unique stories about their experiences in law school. Some recall those years with fondness, and others remember them with less affection. But some experiences are similar for all of us who go through the process of obtaining a law degree. For example, nearly all law schools require students to complete a set of first-year courses that include constitutional law, criminal law, torts, property law, and contracts. Many lawyers also share the common experience of learning the law via the Socratic method. After the first year, however, experiences can differ widely. Some law schools grade on a pass/fail basis, for instance, while many more grade on a curve ranging from A+ to F. Despite such differences, some general recommendations can make the law school experience more meaningful.



MEET FUTURE LAWYERS

A frequent question from students interested in applying to law school is, “Where should I apply?” My answer is simple: “Apply to schools near the jurisdiction where you want to practice, and if you intend on practicing law in Texas, consider applying to law schools in Texas.” The reason I give this advice is that students at Texas law schools meet other students who will be practicing law in Texas and are likely to cross paths with them over the course of their careers. Not only is it likely that Texas lawyers will see their former classmates in courthouses around the state but it is also likely that they will need to refer a client for legal assistance out of town. When lawyers need to refer clients to lawyers practicing in other Texas counties, law school contacts are invaluable. Moreover, when practicing law outside their law home county, lawyers tend to call on their law school contacts to inquire about local practices, the temperament of the judge assigned to a case, or other meaningful information that only local practitioners would know. Undoubtedly, meeting future lawyers and networking with other students in law school is crucial for a lawyer’s future career. Other important considerations to evaluate are whether the law school is accredited by the American Bar Association and how much funding is available to help students finance their law school education.

GET INVOLVED AND FIND A MENTOR

By the end of the second year in law school, the mysteries of the law school experience have been dispelled and fears about the bar exam, future employment, and career plans begin to weigh on the minds of students. It is important not to lose sight of the end goal, even though immediate concerns during the third and final year in law school center on the Texas Bar Exam and future employment. A mentorship with a local practitioner can be immensely beneficial. The mentorship process can be, as it was for me, a scheduled lunch meeting one to two times a month. A mentor serves to allay concerns about the bar exam and the future and also provides fellowship, which is priceless.

There are various ways to find a mentor. First, look into law school clubs and associations. Law student associations typically have networking opportunities with their former members. Many law student organizations maintain communication and correspondence with their former members so that current members can network with current practitioners. When looking for student groups to join, inquire about their mentoring programs. Information can usually be acquired at a seminar, lunch,

or evening reception sponsored by the group. Additionally, law student organizations sometimes keep rosters so that former members can serve as mentors to current members, and students are allowed to contact the lawyers directly instead of waiting for a more formal function. Second, local affiliates of TYLA are an important resource. Young lawyer associations throughout the state have members who have recently graduated from law school, passed the Texas Bar Exam, and undergone the job search process. Additionally, their members are generally willing to engage in discussions with law students wanting information about what lies ahead, and experienced members can later serve as mentors on the actual practice of law. Of course, local bar associations also provide law students with critical mentorship opportunities. Contact a local bar association!

VISIT FACULTY AND STAFF

The old adage that many college and university professors do not see enough student foot traffic through their offices applies somewhat in some law schools. Especially during the first year, law students may be overwhelmed with the new and unfamiliar learning environment, including the Socratic method. The perception that law professors are all as intimidating as the character Charles Kingsfield in *The Paper Chase* persists. In reality, however, law professors tend to be approachable, especially outside the classroom. Students who encounter a complex or difficult topic, issue, or assigned case would do well to visit their professors. Similarly, law school staff can help students navigate the law school process and assist them in having an enjoyable experience.

STUDY TO LEARN THE LAW

Of course, law students must prioritize passing their classes and must make an extra effort to understand the law. All too often, law students concentrate on memorizing the cases for a class reading assignment but fail to understand the principle being taught or the application of the law to the case. Ultimately, understanding the legal principles in case law and learning the law are more important than memorizing assigned cases. **TBJ**



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