

LIFE AFTER LAW SCHOOL: FROM A LARGE FIRM PERSPECTIVE*

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It is easy for a law student to lose sight of the goals of a legal education. Rather than simply concentrating on preparation for a legal career, students are often forced to focus on survival when faced with the pressures of the first year. The unfamiliar teaching methods, combined with the emphasis on grades and class rank, can present an intimidating atmosphere that compels students to concentrate on the short term.

My situation was no different. It was not until I began drafting this Essay that I examined how my legal education had prepared me for my work as an associate at Macfarlane Ferguson & McMullen.¹ After having spent one year as an associate in a large firm, I am more comfortable with a legal education's impact on a student's preparation for a legal career. Though there are many aspects of law school that seemingly have no relevance to my work, I call upon principles learned in law school on a daily basis. These principles are not limited to the basic substantive law of Contracts or Real Property, but also include time management and client relations. I learned many of these principles in the first few months of law school.

The difficulties facing a first-year law student are well-chronicled. Most students are confronted with a new method of education taught by a new breed of educators. My first-year courses included Contracts, Torts, Criminal Law, and Real Property, as well as Civil Procedure and Research & Writing. While the substantive courses received most of my attention due to the emphasis on grades, the

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1. The law firm of Macfarlane Ferguson & McMullen had its genesis in 1884, and currently employs over 50 attorneys in its Tampa, Clearwater, and Tallahassee offices. The firm represents a broad range of local, state, and national companies, government entities, and individuals in all aspects of the law.

principles taught in Research & Writing were equally important.

The importance of the principles learned in Research & Writing is based upon the scope of legal issues that can arise in a large firm. While most large firms are departmentalized, with a new associate assigned to a specific department, there is necessary intermingling between departments. Further, a number of other factors may lead to an associate working outside of her practice area.

My experience at Macfarlane Ferguson & McMullen has provided me exposure to a wide range of legal subjects, from workers' compensation to family law. Although my chosen field of appellate practice is somewhat responsible for this diversity, it is certainly not the only reason. Partners often require immediate assistance on a project, and do not necessarily have time to find an associate in the given department with particularized expertise. In addition, the skilled legal writing essential to the area of appellate practice has allowed me to assist in other areas of the law, such as trial practice.

Most of my first-year professors advised that specific knowledge of intricate legal principles would not be required of first-year associates. While this is generally true, associates are presumed to have a general understanding of certain areas of the law. For example, associates are expected to understand the general principles of first-year courses, such as Contracts, Torts, and Real Property. Furthermore, issues involving rules of procedure, such as time deadlines, arise on a daily basis.²

In addition, associates are expected to have a firm grasp on methods of legal research to acquire a greater understanding of the substantive law. Through my Research & Writing courses in law school, I learned research methods that enabled me to become familiar with areas of the law that I do not frequently address. Research & Writing also provided the elements of legal writing structure and style. Without these tools learned in Research & Writing, it would be impossible to succeed as a practicing attorney.

In addition to legal principles, the first year of law school also teaches many students the fundamentals of time management. Students often begin law school immediately after completion of their undergraduate studies, and may assume that the time spent on

2. In my chosen area of appellate practice, a colleague's initial inquiry undoubtedly concerns issues of appellate procedure such as the time to appeal or preparation of the record on appeal.

their legal studies will be comparable to earlier course work. However, the workload in law school is more demanding than undergraduate studies, and the principles are often more foreign.

These time management skills were even more important with the introduction of extracurricular activities. After my first semester of law school, I accepted a clerking position at a small law firm to gain practical experience. The clerking position was only fifteen hours per week, but forced me to manage my time and arrange my priorities. Clerking allows a law student insight into the real world, as well as potential job opportunities upon completion of law school.

The clerking positions also enabled me to experience different areas of the law and different types of practices. During law school, I was able to work in a small boutique law firm, a medium-sized law firm, and a large law firm. I also completed judicial internships in both federal and state court. Many law schools offer internship programs that allow students to gain practical experience through programs such as a clinic or judicial internship. These programs were invaluable and provided guidance about my choice of practice area.

One of my biggest complaints about law school is the fact that clinical programs are not a mandatory element of the curriculum. Clinical programs not only allow a student to experience the daily work of an attorney, but also introduce a student to a broad range of areas of the law. Further, clinical programs allow networking opportunities, job contacts, and references. These factors were especially helpful to me, as I did not participate in a traditional clerking program before graduation.

Other extracurricular activities include law review, moot court,³ and serving as a research assistant. I was fortunate enough to participate in all of these activities. With these added activities, time management became even more important. Law students must learn to allocate time properly, and determine whether activities can be undertaken while maintaining success in the law curriculum. Many students are reluctant to participate in these extracurricular activities, fearing that the additional time requirements will harm their grade point average. While there is some truth to this belief, the benefits of these activities outweigh the drawbacks. Law firms seek a complete individual, and a student who has had these experi-

3. See Darby Dickerson, *In re Moot Court*, 29 STETSON L. REV. 1217 (2000).

ences is often more prepared to handle the daily grind as a practicing attorney. Like law students, attorneys are expected to be involved in extracurricular activities such as pro bono projects, bar associations, and civic organizations.

Elective courses in law school also assisted in my professional development, due in large part to the specific courses that I chose. By the time I was able to select electives, I had a general idea of the type of law I wished to practice and selected pertinent courses accordingly. For those students who have not decided on a practice area, elective courses also allow a student to learn different areas of the law. For example, several students in my workers' compensation class decided to practice in this area.

In choosing a practice area, I would advise that students remain flexible. There are many students who have decided prior to law school that they would like to practice in a certain area, such as criminal law. These students may be reluctant to change if they find that criminal law is not to their liking. Further, an associate in a large firm may be required to assist in departments outside of a preconceived area. While this work outside of the associate's chosen practice area may not be permanent, associates are expected to lend a hand when needed.

As was the case with my first-year courses, one of my most invaluable elective courses did not teach substantive, black-letter law. In Pretrial Practice, students were matched into pairs and assigned cases at the beginning of the semester. The groups performed the entire pretrial process, from client intake to the pretrial conference. Students interviewed clients, deposed witnesses, and argued motions. Like the clinical programs and judicial internships, the course provided practical experience and confidence after graduation.

The Pretrial Practice course also taught the importance of teamwork, which is necessary to succeed in a large firm. In most law courses, students are not dependent upon another individual for their success or failure. Students can dictate their study habits and are graded on an individual basis. However, the practice of law mandates communication and collaboration with other people. In most cases, an associate works with several other attorneys in the firm. Associates must be able to successfully interact with these attorneys on a professional level and understand that each attorney has different tendencies and work habits.

Theoretically, the size of a large firm can create division due to

the number of attorneys and separation of departments. On the other hand, large firms enable the attorneys to serve all of their clients' needs. Clients can rely on the firm for legal services with confidence that their needs will be met. Attorneys in the firm must work together toward a common goal — serving their clients in conformance with the highest professional standards.

In my limited experience, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to work with superior attorneys with a wide range of specialties. I have confidence in my colleagues and respect for their dedication to the law and community service. There is a sense of pride in Macfarlane Ferguson & McMullen and a recognition of the firm's history. The law firm has been in existence since 1884, so it would be impossible to chronicle the firm's great history in this Essay. From Hugh Macfarlane to Chester Ferguson to T. Paine Kelly, the law firm of Macfarlane Ferguson & McMullen has always symbolized excellence. I am thankful to have the opportunity to continue the legacy and tradition of the firm and will look to my studies in law school as the preparation that has allowed me to succeed.