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Legal Education Prepares Students to Weather Tough Times

by Tara L. Casey

“I JUST DON’T THINK I CAN BE A LAWYER,” she said.

This law student is approaching graduation with the feeling that her job prospects are dwindling. Her job hunt had hit an interminable traffic jam as she senses that more candidates than opportunities are clogging the marketplace. Adding to her anxiety, she does not know how she will pay back her student loans—a figure nearing six digits. After working so hard to get into law school, do well in her classes, and build a résumé that would land her the job of her dreams, she is considering abandoning a legal career altogether to survive the current economic storm.

Hold on: two words that communicate patience and persistence. Although the job market appears bleak and news of cutbacks and layoffs dominate the headlines, a law student need not fear life after graduation.

True, the landscape is quite different than it was five years ago, when the seeds of becoming a lawyer were sown in a student’s brain. Then, law school was viewed as a bridge to a rewarding career that provided a comfortable salary and a fair amount of job security. Now, according to a recent survey by LexisNexis, 21 percent of law students regret attending law school because of the changing legal marketplace. Furthermore, 35 percent of students do not feel adequately prepared to succeed in the new marketplace. Debra Cassens Weiss, “As Law Firms Respond to Crisis, 21% of Law Students Regret Choice,” *ABA Journal* online, Dec. 9, 2009, available at http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/as_law_firms_respond_to_crisis_21_of_law_students_regret_choice/

Indeed, a majority of attorneys believe that the recent economic downturn fundamentally changed the “busi-

ness of law.” (Peter Vieth, “A Time of Transition,” *Virginia Lawyers Weekly*, Dec. 7, 2009, at 1) In response to these dour times, many see the legal profession in a state of transition. Transition to what remains uncertain. However, as the legal community adapts to the times, a law student must likewise adapt, recognizing that the old way of finding that first job may need to be tweaked to be successful.

Traditionally, a law student believed that good grades and a high class rank from an esteemed law school would guarantee entry into any legal environment. These factors may still influence recruitment in some areas, but many prospective employers are looking for candidates with the added credential of practical skills experience. In the legal profession, where time is money, employers are searching for candidates who already bring a skill set to the workplace. Furthermore, as graduates compete with licensed attorneys for positions, it behooves the law student to acquire skills necessary to level the playing field.

Fortunately, as Renae Reed Patrick showcased in the December 2009 issue of *Virginia Lawyer*, Virginia law schools are rich in clinical and pro bono offerings that span subject matters as well as practice areas. Law students who take advantage of these programs gain an edge in the job market, because employers increasingly value the importance of practical experience in new hires.

Because the economy has affected law students and lawyers alike, there is much fertile ground for networking opportunities. Many attorneys are empathetic to the difficulties law students face in the current job market. As a result, these attorneys—especially alumni—are open to speaking with law students about practice area and personal career

path. Introductions to these attorneys may be made by law professors or career services personnel. Although these meetings may not be in reference to a particular position, they provide a law student with an invaluable opportunity to learn more about a specific field as well as cultivate contacts within a legal community.

Additionally, most voluntary bar associations offer student rates for membership. By becoming involved with a bar association during law school, a law student establishes connections within a legal community earlier than his or her peers. Law students who invest time in meeting lawyers outside of the job-search context may find themselves with more opportunities in the long run.

The economy may have altered the marketplace for law students approaching graduation, but legal education itself may be what empowers a student to persevere. During their three years, students are schooled in the art of logical reasoning, regardless of the course or subject matter. Law professors teach students to identify an issue and reason toward a conclusion. As a result, the legal profession is, at its essence, a problem-solving profession.

Currently, law students are facing a daunting problem—a competitive job market in the midst of an economic recession. But because of the training they receive both inside and outside of the classroom, law students are uniquely poised to weather this storm. They just need to hold on.