

AALS Annual Meeting Workshop
A Search for Balance in the Whirlwind of Law School
Thursday, January 5, 2006

2:00-3:30 Concurrent Session: Connection to Purpose
Presentation of Jerry Organ
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1. The Culture of Law School Facilitates Loss of a Sense of Purpose

The culture of law school makes it difficult for students to remain “connected to purpose.”

-Large class sizes with one-size fits all instruction about “thinking like a lawyer” create a cultural context in which individual perceptions of purpose are suppressed rather than affirmed.

-While each student’s unique attributes and experiences may factor into a decision to admit the student to law school, once the student gets to law school, law schools tend not to care greatly about each student’s individualized gifts and experiences. Value in law school is defined by performance in law school and students “sacrifice” other values in pursuit of those accomplishments “prized” by the law school community – good grades, law review, prestigious clerkships with firms and judges, etc.

-Law school tends to create an atomistic environment that not only leaves students “disconnected” from each other, but also “disconnected” from themselves and some of the values/purposes that motivate them.

-Anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that students who come to law school with an orientation toward public service shift away from that orientation during law school. Data also shows a shift from intrinsic motivation to extrinsic motivation during law school.

2. Structures/Processes for Creating a Culture that Affirms Connection to Purpose

- a. Recognition of Students’ Unique Contributions to the Community or to the Profession

Given that the law school culture tends to reward grades and accomplishments within law school, one way to encourage students to preserve a “connection to purpose” is to explicitly recognize and reward those students who remain “connected to purpose.” At the University of St. Thomas, we have a “Mission Awards Ceremony” each Spring in which students, staff and faculty (but mostly students) receive awards for contributions they have made within the three areas of our Vision Statement – Professional Preparation,

Knowledge Creation and Societal Reform, and Service and Community. Through this awards ceremony we explicitly communicate to students that they are not their grades, but are more than their grades – that we as a law school community value them as individuals for the unique contributions they have made to our community and to the profession.

b. Scholarship Renewal that IS NOT Related to Top 25% or Top 33%

A large number of schools have conditional scholarship awards that are renewable based on significant success in law school – students finishing in the top 25% of the first year or top 33% of the first year. This reinforces the notion that students are valued for their grades, not for their unique perspectives and experiences and values, and probably serves to erode students’ sense of connection to purpose. Scholarships exist (I believe) to attract certain students to our communities – students who appear to be very bright based on objective criteria, students who bring diversity to our community, students who are deeply connected to our mission. If we valued these students enough to invite them to be members of our community as first years with a scholarship, what is it about them as first years that makes them less attractive to us? A scholarship renewal policy that is conditional only on academic good standing, as opposed to competitive performance, would better enable students to stay connected to purpose.

c. Opportunities for Discussion and Reflection Regarding Purpose

i. Classroom Engagement -- Schools can create opportunities for students to engage in discussion and reflection regarding purpose. This can happen in a classroom setting of any size. The most obvious candidates are clinical courses, in which students have direct client contact in a closely supervised environment. These interactions – with clients, supervising faculty, and peers – offer students wonderful chances to reflect on why they want to be a lawyer. Small seminar type courses, in which professors may have a better chance to get to know students as people and to have conversations with students about their challenges, hopes and dreams, also provide environments well situated for encouraging connection to purpose. But even large enrollment required courses can provide a meaningful venue for discussions about what it means to be a lawyer and about how to be a lawyer. These discussions can focus on lawyer as problem-solver (rather than overzealous advocate), on a lawyer’s responsibility to assure equal access to justice (not just justice for paying clients), etc. These vignettes about “purpose” can serve as an oasis for students traveling through the desert of law school.

In addition to these types of opportunities, the University of St. Thomas offers its students two other structured opportunities for engagement about purpose.

ii. Mentor Externship Program -- Through the Mentor Externship Program, each of our students is paired with a member of the profession and required to witness several experiences during the course of the year which they debrief with their mentor in an intergenerational exchange about the profession. In addition, students meet in small groups (roughly 18 students) eight times per year. Each small group session focuses on

readings related to a theme, such as servant leadership or professionalism. Students prepare journals reflecting on the readings and then gather to discuss questions related to the readings. These experiences, readings, discussions and journals provide students wonderful opportunities to remain connected with their sense of purpose (or to reconnect to their sense of purpose).

iii. Vocation Retreat -- In addition, at the beginning of each semester, we offer students a weekend retreat experience entitled Vocation and the Study and Practice of Law. This retreat gives students an opportunity to discuss the concept of vocation – focused less on what we do and more on how we do what we do. During the weekend we help students explore their gifts, reflect upon their responsibilities, define a personal sense of mission, assess challenges to living out that mission and develop a plan for the semester/year to help them live out their mission.

3. Summary

Helping students remain “connected to purpose” involves acknowledging the ways in which the existing law school culture erodes students’ connection to purpose and making conscious choices to create a different culture in which students are valued for being unique members of the community and are encouraged to remain “connected to purpose.” This necessarily requires greater intentionality regarding structural and curricular opportunities that will help students reflect upon who they are as law students and who they want to become as aspiring members of the profession.