

## Law School

# The Law School Marathon: What Law School is Really Like

By Jeremy R. Feinberg

ONE OF THE BIGGEST MISTAKES THAT POTENTIAL law students can make is going into their first year of law school without knowing what they are in for. There is a lot to the law school experience—there are three years, not just the infamous first year of torture that everyone hears about. The entire experience, and the first year as a subdivision of it, can be likened to a marathon. The student, like a marathon runner, needs to pace him or herself, keep focused, and take time to relax to avoid burnout. Unlike a marathon, however, in law school there are hurdles that keep popping up and get in the way of the law student. The successful law student needs to know about these hurdles, how to avoid them, and what to do if they get tripped up by one.

The most important thing to know right off the bat is that you should check your undergraduate credentials along with any ego you developed about those accomplishments, at the door. Once you get into the law school of your choice, you have to realize that you are, most likely, no longer at the top of the heap. Most, if not all, of your classmates have similar credentials and talents. If you spent time building up what you thought was going to be a "perfect" law school resume, tear it up. Not only will your prior accomplishments do you no good (being a "campus politico" or a varsity athlete will not help you understand civil procedure any better), but they may even give you a false sense of security that's will be detrimental. Law school is a potentially humbling experience, especially if you're used to standing out amongst your peers and being thought of as brilliant. Naturally, some people will have to stand out of your law school class and be the thought of as the cream of the crop. Don't assume its going to be you just because you got in early to the law school you are attending. Three of the top students in my law school class got in off the wait list. You just cannot predict who/is going to do well and who isn't until you get to law school.

While you should check your prior accomplishments at the door, two things you should not check are your common sense, and more importantly, the person that you are. While law school will certainly change you (for one thing, it will harden your skin to the lawyer jokes your friends throw at you), who you are remains important throughout your law school experience. Similarly, things you have done in the past that have helped define you, such as community service and religious observances, should stay with you as you learn the law. It's very easy to get caught up in arguments about what the law should be in your classes. You need to be able to bring who you are to those arguments. Your values and ethics, however

different from your classmates, are always important. Be open to arguments from those with different views, but share your perspective (where the curriculum and professors allow for it). Don't feel that you have to hide a minority view. You wouldn't get to study any dissenting opinions if everyone felt that way.

A second hurdle that law students must face is competition. Every student feels that just because they were stellar in college they must be a future stellar law student. The truth of the matter is, virtually all law students need some sort of reassurance that they are doing well, that they belong in law school, and that they are better than someone. Professors rarely give direct praise to their students and most law schools use an impersonal (and often imperfect) grading system. Students, therefore, need to have their egos stroked some other way. Unfortunately, "some other way" can often lead to destructive behavior. Destructive behavior might mean rifling through someone's mail folder to steal outlines or computer disks, tearing pages out of books, or hiding materials from one's classmates. These egregious examples are rare however. The competition in law school seems to take more subtle forms, nowadays.

You see it in the law school hallways all the time, especially among first-year students. Students will compare with each other how far they've read in the case book, whether or not they are in a study group and how often they've met, whether they have any outlines, and how well they understand the material they're studying. This can easily cause friction and embarrassment. It may also give some students an unhealthy, imaginary, and inflated sense of security and superiority. In fact, none of these things that students talk about actually matter. Whether you have a 50 page or 100 page outline of course materials to study from is not an effective indicator of how you're doing in law school. Whether you are 100 pages ahead of the professor or simply right on pace doesn't matter either. People have different styles, and more than one style is effective in law school.

Why do students get into these silly conflicts? Probably because they are feeling the pressure and the humility caused by their entrance into law school. This is yet another way that students can let themselves believe that they belong in the law school and are not "stupid." Unfortunately, it comes at the price of making someone else feel like they aren't as good. Such behavior is especially silly considering that the legal profession is built on teamwork and cooperation. Law firms and public interest positions, which most law students aspire to, require professionals to work together; not to segment themselves on arbitrary and imaginary grounds. Students who fail to overcome this hurdle tend to find themselves ill-prepared for the real world.

The third and perhaps most universal obstacle that law students must face is simply general fatigue. This is a marathon. There is a long way from start to finish. You need to pace yourself in order to make it all the way through, especially in the first

*Jeremy R. Feinberg is a first-year at Columbia Law School.*

year. I was once told that the best way to do this is to "do all the things your mother would tell you to do if you were living at home during law school." Those things include eating, sleeping, exercising, studying, and relaxing each and every day. Don't postpone one or more of these for the benefit of the others. You need to have a balanced diet of each in order to subsist in law school. Do you have time to relax while you are a law student? Absolutely. You may not be able to go out to bars like you did when you were in college, but you can still have a life. You may need to limit the types of activities you choose to engage in outside of school (you won't be able to participate in as many extracurriculars), and you may have to find those things that help you relax and de-stress the most and do them most often. You can and will break down and have an awful time in law school if you don't maintain this balance.

Often, studying is the first thing to go.

Students decide that they are not as good as their classmates, no additional work they could do will help them catch up, the studying they choose to do is time that could be better spent, and therefore, they give up. These are the types of students who will, if they go to class, sit in the back row, stop participating actively in class, and generally waste the money that they are paying to go to law school. This is a problem. As one of my first-year law professors once said, "You get what you pay for here, nothing more, nothing less." Law school is something you need to delve **into**. You cannot expect to get as much out of the experience if you choose to learn passively, sit back and try to cram everything in during the last two weeks of the semester. Your grades won't be particularly helped by this either. If you've made the choice to go to law school at all, it only makes sense to maximize the experience. You'll also find, as I have, that classes go much faster, and much more interestingly if

you're on top of your work and able to participate actively. It gives you a built in sense of satisfaction to be able to say, "I would have been able to give the answer if the professor had asked me." It also reminds you that you do know the material. This can supply the ego boost that so many students seem to desperately need.

The bottom line is, you don't need any special training to run in the marathon known as law school. Any undergraduate discipline is capable of preparing you for three years of legal study. The study habits, personality, and desire that you bring to law school are what will keep you going. The prior accomplishments, achievements, and successes, although worthy of being proud of, are no longer important. Congratulations on getting into whichever law school you will be attending. Hopefully, these words of wisdom from someone who has been there will help you make the most of your time there. IB



Cartoon by Raul Avilles