

Are Law Schools in a Position to Raise Attorney Job Satisfaction?

By John P. Hale

Lawyers have become increasingly creative in using their law degrees in other fields of endeavor. In an obvious trend, attorneys are leaving the practice of law to seek fulfilling professions such as business or teaching. The American Bar Association surveyed attorneys in 1984 and 1990, during which time the number of lawyers indicating that they were “very satisfied” with their work decreased by 20 percent (only approximately 30 percent remained very satisfied).¹ In 1995, an ABA Young Lawyers Division Survey indicated that the “very satisfied” had slipped to only 21 percent.² Most startling was a 1990 report by the *New York Times* that approximately 40,000 lawyers left the practice of law yearly, a number that roughly corresponds to annual admission of students to law school.³

These dearly departed from the law, some would say, are experiencing heaven after years of a frustrating grind. Whether leaving upon law school graduation, after a full career, or sometime between, the lawyer takes many skills that easily translate into other careers. Patience and discipline are necessary to shepherd a lawsuit through years of litigation or to bring to close a lengthy and heated business transaction. Moreover, lawyers universally have the ability to analyze issues thoroughly, and do so usually, under dire consequences for mistake. Therefore, defecting attorneys have acquired skills that transcend the legal profession.

But why so much dissatisfaction? In 1990 David Margolick described one theory for the sharp increase in dissatisfaction among lawyers. He cited the trend of students to enter law school by default if they wanted a graduate degree but decided not to attend another professional school.⁴ He reported

that the trend was inspired by the belief that a law degree was greatly flexible and glamorous. This resulted, he theorized, in a gap between expectations from a law practice and the reality of practicing.

The nation’s law schools are best positioned to address and possibly diminish the schism between expectations and the realities of legal practice. But should the profession burden law schools with the responsibility to dissuade prospective students from entering simply because a student does not have legal aptitude or a legal career in mind? Some might argue that through the course of a good legal education, a student might learn to love the profession. The vagaries of judging whether a particular student would enjoy and flourish in the practice of law, among other things, mitigate imposing the burden on the schools.

If law schools will not be screening applicants for their motives and legal aptitude, perhaps the schools could address the issue of future satisfaction during law school. Law schools can both impart a real sense of the practice of law and prepare and guide those who, upon tasting this reality, choose another flavor and wish to apply their onerously acquired skills in another environment. If the responsibility were fully embraced by educators, their efforts could be a means to improve the satisfaction of future recipients of juris doctor degrees. What, then, can our legal educators do to implement these lofty goals?

Several things can be done, according to Anthony Bastone II, Assistant Dean of Ca-

reer Services at the University of Colorado at Boulder School of Law, who started a “Legal Career Options Day” that has been copied by 15 law schools in the United States. The event provides law students an opportunity to network with law practitioners and with corporate, private, government, and public employers who may wish to hire attorneys for nonlegal positions. Dean Bastone believes that the event “underscores the versatility of the juris doctor degree.”

Among his many anecdotes, usually from past-participants in his Legal Career Options Day, he tells the story of David Musselwhite, backup quarterback at Southern Methodist University for Don Meredith. Musselwhite, a distinguished attorney at Aiken and Gump, was tired of lawyering for his elite clients. He and his wife opened a coffee shop in Dallas named Legal Grounds Law and Coffee, where he sells coffee and practices law on the side.

Dean Bastone believes that if law schools admit students who are either unsure whether they want to practice or otherwise desire the versatility of a law degree, then “that law school should be reminded to provide services that allow the student to be exposed to both traditional and nontraditional legal careers.”

Beyond career counseling, legal educators can look to England, where four Inns of Court have sole jurisdiction to admit barristers to practice law. Having existed for hundreds of years, the traditions of the Inns are steep, revered, and yet pragmatic. The Inns require students to dine on a number of occasions with barristers. Discussing law with a barrister and listening to a speaker afterwards provides students with a true flavor of the practice. Students are also encouraged to dine in the barristers’ dining hall.

All columns are the opinion of the writer and do not represent the position of the Legal Education Committee.

"Students of the Inn are heirs to a great living tradition—as indeed are barristers and Judges. Dining gives them the chance to mix and talk with other students and with practitioners . . . [and] meet with Judges and Benchers from the senior ranks of the profession."⁵ Once admitted to the bar, graduates are required to fulfill at least six months of pupilage with a barrister in chambers.

We do have the American Inns of Court, which provide mentoring for young lawyers and students and summer law clerk positions. Yet many students rarely have the opportunity to sit and work with a practicing attorney. Michigan law schools are working to address the problem.

The University of Detroit Mercy School of Law has a voluntary mentoring program that pairs alumni with first-year law students. Ann Griffin, Director of Career Services and Academic Counseling, said that the school "asks its alumni mentors to provide general, practical advice on how to succeed in law school and also to discuss with students how they are using their law degrees. In addition to traditional practitioners, the program includes alumni mentors who use their law degrees in a variety of ways outside the practice of law." In some instances, the mentoring relationship has continued after the first year.

Marjoire Lang, Assistant Dean of Career Services at Wayne State University Law School, conducted a highly successful legal careers workshop in fall 2000 based on Dean Bastone's model, focusing on first-year students. Her motive for working with students and alumni "was predicated upon my awareness of and desire to ameliorate attorneys' satisfaction with their professional and personal lives." She promotes career assessment instruments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory and conducts mentoring events and career development groups, discussion groups for recent graduates searching the market for optimal employment.

Both Cooley Law School and Ave Maria School of Law have implemented similar programs. Cooley has an extensive mentoring program involving faculty, alumni, and students. Ave Maria has a voluntary mentoring program, which matches first-year students with legal professionals whose ethical and

professional goals are consistent with those of the students.

Michelle Borchanian, Academic Support Coordinator, said that the purpose of the program is "to provide each law student with the opportunity to meet and speak with an attorney who works in a legal forum that interests them and . . . with a professional mentor who will guide them throughout their legal education and legal career." Last year, nearly 90 percent of the first-year class actively participated in the program. First-year mentors are chosen from the Board of Visitors, comprised of approximately 350 legal professionals from every state.

The University of Michigan Law School invites lawyers from all types of practice and careers to talk to students about their options. This fall the school will have a panel on "Alternatives to Practice," which will include a lawyer who works in the human resources department of an organization and a lawyer who is a freelance legal, business, and fiction writer. In addition to mentor programs, a *Lunch with a Lawyer* series and an annual Career Conference, Michigan State University–Detroit College of Law uses technology to help students with their career decision-making. An interactive online tool titled "Career Transit" was developed to allow students

to learn about their career options and assess interests using the Internet.

The Inns of Court, and the programs at the Michigan law schools and the University of Colorado, show that law practice can be more formally integrated into the law school experience. From these pioneering schools, others can and should address the serious issue of attorney dissatisfaction by improving career expectations and career counseling. ♦

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FOOTNOTES

1. Margolick, David; *The New York Times*, "Law: At the Bar; More lawyers are less happy at their work, a survey finds." August 17, 1990. Section B, Page 5, Column 1.
2. Pennington Shannon, Marcia, *American Bar Association Law Practice Management*; Smart Practices; On Balance: Charting a Course for Satisfaction and Success in the Legal Profession, Vol 26, No 2, p 57.
3. *The Chicago Tribune*, "Stress outweighs pay as lawyers flee profession," Page 1, zone C; Source: *The New York Times* News Service. March 11, 1990. See also the American Bar Association's website for bar admissions: http://www.abanet.org/legaled/statistics/LE_BAstats.html.
4. Margolick, Section B, Page 5, Column 1.
5. *Id.*