

“What Do You Crave?”

Developing Young Lawyers’ Ability to Know Themselves

By Professor Paula A. Monopoli

OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS, the legal profession has been very concerned about the retention of young lawyers—especially with women and minorities. Large firms have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on consultants to find out how to better bind young lawyers to them, after having invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in recruiting and training those lawyers. Those efforts focus on what the firm can do to better fit the lawyer—flexible schedules, better professional development opportunities, and leadership opportunities are a few of the policies that firms have implemented to alter their structures in order to enhance retention.

However, there has been less focus in the profession on what lawyers themselves can do to enhance their desire to stay with a particular firm. In conjunction with the Fetzer Institute, UMDLaw has been working on this question. Over the past two years, the Law School has brought together practitioners, judges, and academics as a working group to focus on what those who have long since graduated from law school say they wish they had been taught in law school in this regard. A central theme of those discussions has been that these legal professionals all wish they had been given better skills to help them figure out what it is they are passionate about.

Teaching students how to make decisions based on their interests and passions has been a recurring refrain when these lawyers, judges, and academics have come together to help the Law School integrate a new approach into the curriculum. The overarching goal is to introduce leadership into the curriculum. The working group has concluded that in order to effectively lead others, one must first know oneself. For students to better know themselves, they must develop the necessary skills—self-reflection, strategic career planning, finding mentors, networking with practicing lawyers, engaging in clinical and experiential learning while in law school—to discover what it is they love to do.

The Alumni Career Path survey shows that many lawyers were happiest when they worked for an organization that had a mission. This was echoed in the working group meetings. Everyone needs to make a living, but that alone is not sufficient to keep lawyers interested and engaged in their careers. Finding out what you’re passionate about is central to finding the kind of legal employment at which you will want to stay. Do you love to counsel clients, love to appear in court, enjoy the puzzle of putting together a business transaction or estate plan? How much does money matter to you? How about spending time with friends or engaging in recreational activities? Where does the balance come in your life? Do you love working in

teams, or do you not play well with others?

Figuring out how to help students develop these skills is a challenge. As law professors, we know how to teach Torts and Contracts. But we know little about how to teach the skills necessary for our students to divine what their strengths and weaknesses are and how to build a reflective

practice that they can use the rest of their lives. So we have to be willing to borrow this knowledge from other disciplines. We have reached out to colleagues in other parts of the academy—social psychologists, political science and leadership scholars, business school professors, lawyers engaged in training through non-profit organizations—to think in innovative ways how to expand the law school curriculum to “build a better lawyer.” UMDLaw has introduced several new courses that build on these multi-disciplinary approaches to teaching students how to make sound decisions about their own abilities and interests. The ultimate goal is to help them make better decisions about the career path that best fits their strengths and passions.

Perhaps law firms concerned about retention should consider spending some of their retention budgets on collaborating with law schools. They could help us explore how students can make better decisions up-front in terms of where they want to work and what the best fit is for them. Law firms would do well to encourage law students to ask themselves, “What do I crave?” and to help us help them develop the skills to answer that question. That would go a long way toward resolving their retention issues and improving the legal profession as a whole.

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