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The Professional Investment

“Look around you — to your left and right...”

By Richard Brown



One of the first words that you will hear at professional schools these days, including those run by Jesuit universities, is the term investment. While this may not be surprising for business students aspiring for MBA's or CPA licenses, on first glance it may seem a little out of place for law and medical students. Investing in justice? Investing in health? The former sounds like political rhetoric and the latter a pitch for the latest infomercial home gym. It makes more sense to warn that the term is not just used for your typical stock trade or even that savings bond your grandmother got you for your birthday when you were ten. The term investment is used in professional schools for the money students spend on their educations.

The education as investment concept was introduced to me in law school during the infamous “look around you” speech. This is the speech where some administrator warns the incoming students that the rigors of law school will soon winnow the wheat from the chaff and many students present will not be back.. It is like the call to start sharpening your daggers and watching your backs. I remember a professor charged with giving this

speech that said something to the effect of, “[Y]our work ethic in law school will determine whether your investment in legal education pays off.” If I did not work hard to make the grade, my investment of blood, sweat, and most importantly, student loan money, would all be in vain.

Come to find out, after talking to other professional students, the story was similar for them too. A business school student directed me to a nifty little “MBA investment calculator” online that could tell whether or not you should attend a graduate program in business based on your current salary and your expected expenses during the period of enrollment. Apparently, the desire to become a better manager, accountant, etc. was not a part of the calculus. Similarly, medical student characters on TV are made more credible on primetime dramas by complaining about paying off their student loans. Everyone in professional school worries about the investment.

This summer, the word investment had a regular engagement on the front page of most of this nation's newspapers. The crisis on Wall Street and financial centers world wide even attracted the attention of the Vatican. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone stated in a recent speech that the current crisis was the result of nothing other than greed. He stated that “Where people look solely for short-term profit, identifying it with good, they end up erasing the benefit itself.” He further noted that, “[W]hen instead God is ignored, the ability to respect rights and recognize the common good begins to disappear.”

The real bottom line on the current obsession with making a quick return

on the investment of education is that a correction in the market is needed. Many students have lost sight of what being a professional really means. The term implies a level of competence and ethical principles agreed upon and enforced by one's colleagues. The amount of money one makes does not make one a professional. Indeed, if the investment analogy must be applied, then the stakeholders are those in society who need competent and ethical lawyers, doctors, and business professionals. Instead of focusing on outpacing student loans in the minimum amount of time, professional students should be reminded by educators that society has made an investment in us, and that debt to ply our trades with morality and compassion is equally as important as a six-figure salary.

Jesuit institutions are ideally positioned to begin a corrective pattern of professional education. Ingrained in the Jesuit educational mission is the idea that that students learn in class to make the world around them a better place. If Jesuit professional schools cannot say that their students are truly investments in justice or health or ethics for mankind, then these schools have failed an important part of their mission. It would be nice one day to hear about an opening speech at a law school that said, “[L]ook around you, the person next to you might need your help in the coming weeks, and as professionals I hope you do not miss the opportunity to do so.” ■

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