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Dean's Desk: Third year offers students opportunity to define, hone skills

Hannah Buxbaum October 9, 2013



DEAN'S DESK

Hannah L. Buxbaum
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Our profession is in the midst of an important conversation about legal education – one that encompasses the costs of that education, the employment opportunities for entry-level lawyers, and the curriculum that law schools offer.

One recurring proposal, championed most recently by President Obama, is to reduce law school from three years to two (or at least to grant schools the flexibility to offer two-year programs if they so choose). In considering this particular solution, it's important to take a close look at how students are currently spending their third year. What we notice at the Maurer School of Law is that there is no uniform answer to this question. Of course, it's not a surprise that students use their third year of study in different ways, and to different ends. They come to our school from a variety of personal, educational

and professional backgrounds, and with a variety of career objectives in mind. And during the course of their studies here – including in our first-year class on the legal profession – they learn more about their own particular strengths and values, and how they align with potential career paths. Therefore, the third-year experience differs from student to student.

For example, some third-year students work in a clinic. Like most schools, we run a number of clinics that combine client representation or field work with an intensive academic component. Our Conservation Law Clinic, for instance, gives students the opportunity to work with staff attorneys at the Conservation Law Center, collaborating on cases involving natural resource law and policy. Students in the clinic draft legal documents and work on their presentation skills before administrative law judges. At the same time, they hone their skills in time management, collaboration, and research and writing. Clinic work is hands-on and fast-moving, and students who participate report that their research and writing skills improve immensely during the course of the semester.

Other students participate in full-semester externships in the public sector. Last spring, we had students working in Washington, D.C., for organizations including the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Public Defender Service, and the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority. These externships not only provide hands-on training, but also expose students to additional substantive law in complex and specialized fields. In addition, they help students build the professional networks that enhance their placement prospects.

For some students, the most productive use of the third year involves additional coursework rather than

experiential learning. Our 3Ls often return from their summer work experience with a much clearer picture of the gaps they need to fill before moving into permanent employment. After working as summer associates in law firms, some students realize that they need to improve their writing skills. So they take courses such as advanced legal writing, which builds on the mandatory first-year writing program and exposes students to a wide range of document types, including client letters and contracts. Other offerings in this area include transaction drafting, litigation drafting, and strategies in critical reading and writing.

Other students, finding that their career paths are more clearly defined by the beginning of their 3L year, devote that year to additional classes in particular substantive fields — classes that aren't just more of the same from their second year, but that give them the richer set of doctrinal, analytical and professional competencies that will enable them to succeed in their chosen field. For students pursuing a career in intellectual property, for instance, the third year might include highly specialized classes such as IP antitrust and patent trial practice. Some students deepen their concentration in a particular substantive area by taking advantage of classes offered at IU's Kelley School of Business, or its School of Public and Environmental Affairs. (And, of course, some students choose to pursue a *four-year* course of study by obtaining joint degrees such as the JD-MBA or JD-MPA.)

The role of the third year of law school — and whether it's necessary at all — will continue to be a topic of discussion for the foreseeable future. While that debate continues, our students are putting their third year to good use in ways tailored to their specific needs and objectives as they plan their careers. •

Hannah L. Buxbaum is Interim Dean and John E. Schiller Chair in Legal Ethics at the Indiana University Maurer School of Law. *Opinions expressed are the author's.*