From Thinking Like a Lawyer to Acting Like a Lawyer: Externships Provide Invaluable Experience

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Recommended Citation
Parrish, Austen L., "From Thinking Like a Lawyer to Acting Like a Lawyer: Externships Provide Invaluable Experience" (2015). Articles by Maurer Faculty. 2099.
https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/facpub/2099

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From thinking like a lawyer to acting like a lawyer: Externships provide invaluable experience

Editor’s Note: Recognizing the foundational importance of law schools to our system of justice, we are excited and grateful to debut a periodic column in Res Gestae by Indiana’s law school deans. First up is Dean Austen L. Parrish of the I.U. Maurer School of Law in Bloomington, Ind.

Across Indiana and beyond, they are learning on the job. From the glass-paneled buildings in our big cities to the small town courthouses where the county clerk knows everyone by name, students from the I.U. Maurer School of Law are getting hands-on experience this summer and year-round. The result: a positive impact on their own future and that of our state.

After a 1L year spent adjusting to the rigors of legal education and countless hours buried in textbooks and cases, our students begin taking their first career steps. At the Maurer School of Law, part of a well-rounded education means taking advantage of experiential opportunities that help students determine how their values, interests, personality and skills best fit into the legal profession. Some of this happens in simulation and skills courses, in our seven live-client clinics, and in our six projects, where our students collectively volunteer thousands of hours of pro bono service. (See law.indiana.edu/students/clinic/index.shtml to learn more.)

But hands-on learning also happens through field placements. By pursuing a clerkship, externship, fellowship or internship, students are test-driving a particular legal career, gaining valuable experience and learning while building a professional track record. Regardless of the path, they are helping themselves and their communities across Indiana.

Students who work in prosecutors’ offices throughout the state provide one good example. Students who commit to working at least two semesters with an office can often see a case from the beginning to its resolution, providing invaluable insight into the criminal justice system.

“Not many people can graduate from law school and say they’ve tried a bench trial,” says Katie Langlois, director of intern programs for the Marion County Prosecutor’s Office.

“Even if a student doesn’t want to become a deputy prosecutor, the experience is worthwhile,” she said. “If they become a public defender, they’ve already been on the other side. There’s a respect that needs to be had on both sides, and if I have a future public defender working here, that attorney is going to go through his or her career knowing how we approach and handle cases. That makes the whole system work better.”

Some go on to take even bigger roles within that system. Nathan Harter IV, a 2013 alumnus of our law school, started an internship with his hometown prosecutor’s office in Decatur County in 2012.

“Law school for me started as an academic adventure,” he said, “but along the way I found myself seeking ways to actualize the lessons productively. The chance to apply what I was learning in law school to real-world situations and protect the community I love was a thrill. I walked out of the office every day feeling 10 feet tall.”

So strong was the feeling of community engagement that Nathan decided to run for prosecutor in 2014.

He won.

At Maurer, our Career Services Office works closely with the director of externship and clerkship placements and various other faculty to ensure students who want opportunities have them. For students, this can mean working with federal and state judges, government agencies and nonprofit organizations. The school has eight externship programs, including criminal law, intellectual property, public interest and judicial field placements. For Ashley Lenderman and Von Lovan, it meant clocking in every day in Indianapolis, where this summer they worked with Langlois at the prosecutor’s office.

Both rising 2Ls have found their summers enriched by working in the criminal justice system. According to Ashley:

“In my first year of law school, I was taught how to ‘think like a lawyer.’ My externship helped inform an equally important part of the equation: how to act like a lawyer. I was able to attend the jury trials of countless attorneys to see how they each handled themselves in court. From there, I was able to pick out things I really want to bring into my legal practice someday, be it a tactic I liked in jury selection or how to close a closing argument.”

Von, for his part, has been active in the Indianapolis area, giving presentations to local community organizers as part of the Marion County Community Prosecution Division. That community outreach is helping prevent crimes like arson, burglary and theft by proactively engaging citizens.

“Internships or externships provide tremendous experiences for rising 2Ls,” he said. “Prosecutorial
work allows law students to put the first-year law school courses to use and gain practical experience. It gives you the opportunity to work on a case from the very first stage."

Nate’s, Ashley’s and Von’s experiences underscore how different reality on the ground can be from the narrow, caricatured view of law schools sometimes presented in the national media. The view of the out-of-touch, staid academic institution, with faculty teaching only the theoretical and not the useful, is untethered from what’s actually happening at law schools. Far from having an aversion to all things practical, law schools are strong advocates of externships and experiential education in the development of our young attorneys. This is true even at the most prestigious and highly regarded schools, including Maurer.

Mind you, this is not to suggest that law schools should be mere vocational trade schools, whose purpose is to have students attain narrow technical mastery. Great law schools are scholarly institutions that belong in great universities, and we have more ambitious goals than simply preparing our students for the first day of their first job. But as much as we are committed to providing our students with a deep understanding of law across a wide variety of subject areas, as well as a strong foundation of legal theory, reasoning and analysis, we are also committed to providing meaningful and sophisticated experiential opportunities that introduce hands-on skills. By fully educating students in the theory as well as the practice of the law, we ensure that when students like Ashley, Nate and Von graduate they are prepared to meet the increasingly complex demands of the profession.

The bench and bar in Indiana have been critical in these efforts too, helping prepare the next generation of lawyers and leaders. As one example from this June, the ISBA hosted a panel on “Experiential Education in Legal Education Today” at its Legal Education Conclave. The conclave brought together the practicing bar, the judiciary and legal educators, while the panel described the depth and variety of programs that law schools now offer. (Read more about the Conclave in this issue of Res Gestae at pp. 8-9.)

As the new semester gets under way, it’s heartening to hear how Maurer students are spending their summers, discovering new things about themselves and creating a positive impact on their communities. We are grateful for the organizations that create these opportunities and the lawyers who dedicate so much time serving as role models and caring mentors. They are helping our students move beyond the books and into the profession. As a dean, it’s particularly heartening because students like Ashley, Nate and Von give us a glimpse of the future leaders of Indiana. ☺