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The Real Key to Success

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MESSAGE FROM THE INTERIM DEAN



Incoming students pledge themselves to the task during orientation week at the Law School.

The real key to success

Each fall, the dean of the Law School has the pleasure of welcoming the incoming first-year class. These newcomers are eager, enthusiastic and attentive, offering an ideal moment to deliver a message with lasting impact. This year, I focused on a question undoubtedly on the minds of all: What is the key to success in the legal profession? Below is an excerpt from my address.

Here's your first law school quiz. Answer this question:

Which of the following is the *most* important to future success in the legal profession?

- A. What you know
- B. What you've accomplished
- C. Who you are

Choice "A" is wrong. This answer assumes, wrongly, that a professional's value consists mainly of what he or she knows. It's true that professionals need specialized knowledge; that's part of what it means to be a professional. But the information of which professional knowledge consists (1) regularly gets forgotten, (2) doesn't disappear, and (3) can always be found again. What you know is important to professional success, but it's not the most important thing.

Choice "B" is also wrong. People make this mistake by thinking as follows: "Mr. Employer, hire me. You need someone with a J.D. I have a J.D. Look, here it is. You need someone to practice corporate law; I took Corporate Law – see, it says so here on my transcript. You need someone who can practice Securities Law, Bankruptcy and Commercial Law. I took those courses; just look at my transcript. I have all the credentials; surely you must hire me."

The mistake here lies in assuming, wrongly, that the qualifications for a professional position consist in having successfully checked off items on a list. This way of thinking wrongly equates the accumulation of credentials with personal achievement. But the accumulation of credentials does not a high-quality professional make. The fact that you've completed the course of study or have some prior relevant experience does not by itself make you an appealing candidate for a job, or ensure your appeal to potential clients. There is something much more important.

That something else is choice "C" – who you are. I mean, for example, the way other people respond to you when you walk into a room. Do you exude competence? Do you earn their respect? Do you fill them with confidence that you will get the job done, and done right, on time, and within budget? How do you react to adversity, to setbacks, to stressful situations? Do you redouble your efforts? Buckle down for the long haul? Do you bounce back from losses? Do you inspire others and get the best out of them? People who possess these qualities are the people whom employers want to hire and clients want to retain.

You might already be such a person. If so, then you are already well along the path to professional success. If you're not,

then you must work as hard on this aspect of professionalism as any other. How?

The personal aspects of professionalism are taught differently, mainly through modeling. Our faculty and alumni mentors are the best at what they do. They will show you, through their behavior, how to be a top-notch professional. You in turn must open yourself to the lesson; you must recognize their behavior as a form of instruction, and replicate it until it becomes second nature. The ultimate challenge of law school, then, is to remake yourself into someone who not only has the necessary credentials and the necessary knowledge, but is the kind of person employers want to hire and clients want to retain, again and again. We will help you achieve this goal, but ultimately the challenge is yours. Become that person, the one others look to and in whom they are willing to place their trust and confidence.

It takes a village to train a lawyer, and you, our alumni and friends, are critical players in the training process. Please stay connected and in touch; I'd be grateful to hear your thoughts and concerns.

With all best wishes,

