Faculty Spotlight

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When I was asked to write about what I do, why I do it, and why I like it, it struck me that I have one of the best jobs in this law school. As a Legal Practice Professor, I spend most of my time meeting with students and reviewing the papers and assignments they prepare for my class. Often I am asked how I ever can get any "real work" accomplished when the majority of my time is spent seeing students or evaluating their papers. I can only reply that my "real work" is to help students develop the skills they will need to become effective lawyers, and the only way I can accomplish that task is to spend a great deal of time working on a one-to-one basis with students, either by providing written comments on their papers or by meeting with them in student conferences. That is what makes the Legal Practice course different from many other Law School classes, and that is why I love what I do.

I have taught legal writing, research, and legal reasoning over the past 17 years in a variety of ways, and each year I am more and more convinced that I can find a better way to teach this course so that students will be better prepared to tackle the practice of law. The practice of law is a constantly evolving enterprise, and I must stay abreast of the changes in the practice so my students will be able to handle the challenges that await them. That means that I stay in touch with practicing lawyers and occasionally practice myself. My area of practice has been insurance litigation and coverage — an area many lawyers find arcane and unreasonably complicated — but I am constantly intrigued by how much I learn from every new case I handle. I have learned about environmental issues and construction methods and I have learned how to educate myself on almost any topic. It is this process of self-education that has kept me excited about my work as a lawyer. And it is my hope that I can convey to my students that the law offers them a lifetime of learning, which will help them find enjoyment in their careers as lawyers.

However, I do not believe that my students will enjoy their careers unless they learn the fundamental skills that all well-prepared lawyers should possess. Along with legal reasoning, legal research, and legal writing skills, my students need to know how to economically and ethically handle the problems their clients will some day bring to them. That means that they have to be thoughtful about not only how to accomplish their clients' goals, but also to do so in an efficient, economical, and ethical manner. While I know that I cannot teach them everything they will need to know as practicing lawyers, at least I can introduce them to the basic skills they will need and give them the tools they will need to teach and improve themselves throughout their careers.

So it is this constant striving for the perfect way to teach these essential skills that keeps me involved in teaching the Legal Practice course. I am realistic enough to know that I may never achieve my goal, but along the way I have the pleasure of working with enthusiastic, bright, and motivated first-year students and they make the hours of grading and evaluating worth it. Watching their progress throughout the year is very rewarding and it keeps me coming back for more.
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Richard H. Pildes,
J.D. Harvard; A.B. Princeton,
Professor of Law

"Michigan is embarking on one of the most significant innovations in the first-year teaching of legal practice skills, particularly legal writing, that any major law school has undertaken in years. Grace has both the professional experience and personal qualities to lead this transformation. In her first year here, she succeeded in hiring a staff of eight full-time Legal Practice Professors who possess an extraordinary range of skills; this year, Grace and her staff will get the new program off the ground and running. Grace understands the varied demands of contemporary legal practice and the difficulties students confront in learning to write persuasively. Through her role here, Michigan students should become far more effective at entering the profession with well-justified confidence in their abilities to write effectively."

Grace C. Tonner
J.D. Loyola, B.A. California State University, Long Beach

Edward A.G. Wigglesworth,
First-Year Law Student

"Professor Tonner's experience as an attorney is very beneficial in Legal Practice. Her ability to relate the various assignments to specific problems and issues she has encountered prevent the course from being too abstract or theoretical."