Class of 1990 Five Year Report Alumni Comments

University of Michigan Law School

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RESPONSES FROM THE MEMBERS OF
THE CLASS OF 1990
TO THE LAST QUESTION ON 5-YEAR SURVEY ASKING FOR
"COMMENTS OF ANY SORT ABOUT YOUR LIFE
OR LAW SCHOOL OR WHATEVER"

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My overall experience in law school was quite positive! I give the University high marks for providing a top quality education. However, I think that the 3rd year curriculum could use much improvement. In many ways it was just a repetition of the 2nd year. This is a shame and a waste of valuable resources.

Instead, the entire 3rd year should consist of a clinical course and a writing course (the goal of which should be to complete a thesis of publishable quality). I say this mainly because law schools, in general, fail to prepare students for the practical aspects of practice. Although a thorough study of principles and theory is necessary, it would be helpful if the school prepared us to be lawyers. Instead we were only prepared to be legal scholars. As a result, we were sorely unprepared for the practice of law. This leaves us to learn how to practice law either through in-house training programs (which many firms, including my own, have instituted to address the failure of law schools) or through "trial by fire" -- in short, we were clueless. Considering the high tuition price we paid, the utter lack in practical preparation is a crime.

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Law school was, on balance, an unpleasant experience. In hindsight, I would still have attended. But I would have had different expectations and approached the experience differently.

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I loved law school, unlike many of my co-workers, and I believe that my experiences during law school have made me a happier lawyer.

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The greatest benefit I received from attending law school was meeting my peers. I learned more about the world, about how to think and about life, from the diverse and exceptional student body at U-M, that, regardless of my feelings on the profession of the law, attending law school was worthwhile.

The practice of law, however, leaves something to be desired: the profession seems to have degenerated, opportunities to really think and to really act in a responsible, upright fashion are too few!
I wish practice were like law school. I loved law school; it was possibly the best experience in my life. If I had it all to do over, I would have done the academic track -- law journal and apply for clerkship and then participate in law professional recruitment process -- and of course, I wouldn't be married to someone who is permanently fixed in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

What I would like to do now (if I have the guts) is to join/establish an "alternative-style" practice with several others, which doesn't have classic hierarchy/partner-associate/2000 hours per year organization. Any takers?

I would like to see the practice of law return to being a profession rather than a business.

I have found it impossible to balance work and family. When work is going well I'm never home. When I'm at home enough, I don't get my work done. Many others at my firm experience the same problem. Working part-time has not been a successful option for those (including myself) who have tried it.

I found the Michigan Clinical Law Program to be the most practical course I took in law school. I believe clinical courses should be expanded so that most, if not all, students have the opportunity to take such a course.

I hated working for a big firm in a big city, but it took me a while to figure out what's important to me. I've got a great life now, with plenty of time to do the things I really enjoy.

I am increasingly distressed by the deterioration in the U of M's standing as a law school.

I think that one of the biggest problems that law schools (and the law in general) face is the onslaught of political correctness. Political correctness replaces free speech and careful thought with nonsensical demands for group rights.

It's a pleasure to read a document drafted in the tranquil and
intelligent style of academia. Consider this a communique from the front lines!

My opinion of the Law School is that it is excellent, and I miss it! I was of course certifiably insane during my law school days, and I wish I could do it over. Without the stress, I would no doubt do as well but get a lot more out of it.

In retrospect, the only thing I would say is that wacko viewpoints should be treated as wacko viewpoints, not with deference and detached respect. (I mean in both professors and students.) I think law school is a moral classroom as much as a legal one.

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During the past 5 years, I have met hundreds of my peers from other law schools and have concluded, based on conversations with them, that, if one has to go to law school, Michigan is the least painful way to go. I will always appreciate the fact that the Law School fostered and encouraged social interaction: it reduced the competitive pressure inherent in the study of law.

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I very much appreciate having the opportunity to go to the University of Michigan Law School.

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Law is becoming less of a practice and more of a business. This is a disturbing trend that has an adverse impact on the desirability of law as a career. Highly effective trial advocates are relegated to the inferior stature of "service attorneys" whereas lawyers who sign up clients without demonstrating the same level of advocacy are elevated to the Brahman stature of "Rainmakers."

In the practice of law, intellect, skill and hard work mattered; in the business of law, these qualities are becoming less valued and relevant. If you want to succeed at law today, you will go farther with a used-car salesman mentality than with my mentality, to wit, "What can I learn today to become a more effective attorney."

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Hiring Catharine MacKinnon was the best move ever!

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I feel very fortunate to be as happy as I am with my practice. I attribute my overall positive experience with law to two things: 1) Practice in a small town -- in an excellent firm. I view this as the best of both worlds -- a stimulating environment with good clients and talented colleagues combined with a lifestyle that is, if not easygoing, at least liveable. 2) Discovering through coincidence and good fortune, a practice area that really interests me (health law).

I'm still trying to figure out the balance between work priorities and other interests. Actually, it seems to be getting a little tougher, the more engaged I am in my work. I feel torn more often now between work and other activities, but considering the alternatives, it's not a bad situation.

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My work history since law school has been somewhat unusual and therefore some of my answers may seem strange. The only type of work that I have done since law school has been clerking for judges. I am now in my fourth separate clerkship (though not all have been for the standard length of time). I have been doing all this clerking mainly because, after my first clerkship ended in 1991, I found it extremely difficult to find any non-clerking position. This difficulty continued even into 1993. Within the past year, I have become very unsure of what I want to do (i.e., what type of area to practice in), and I have even questioned whether I want to continue in the law. In fact, I think I would readily abandon the law if I had some idea of what else to do.

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I wish that law students could have a better way of learning what the practice of law was all about while they are still in school. I certainly never expected to encounter so much dissatisfaction in this profession, including my own. Most of the lawyers I meet stay in the practice for the money, not because they enjoy their work. If you have a soul, I suggest another line of work.

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Four and one half years after law school, I think the following comments are in order:

1) Require a clinical program involving oral advocacy in the 3rd year. This will provide valuable "real world" skills and will be beneficial to the community surrounding the Law School.

2) The Summer Starter Program was a terrific experience and made the entire law school course a pleasant one. My closest friends
from law school are summer starters and I find that I will always call a summer starter for an out-of-town referral before any other lawyer.

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It is business skills and people skills that determine how well you will do in any field -- they should be emphasized.

My intellectual education was first-rate and the law is a good springboard to other fields.

The best thing I learned in law school was critical legal studies -- not just the intellectual level of the material, but laying bare the baldly political function of the law in American society.

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I hope, for the sake of others who were in my position, that the Law School has considered or is considering revamping how scholarships, grants, and financial aid are distributed. I had no financial resources going into law school yet was denied any aid other than loans because of my father's income despite the fact that I had not been financially dependent on him for years and received no money from him. Today, I am stuck in a career that I hate because I have $47,000 in law school student loans that I have to make payments on, and only a law career will sustain payments each month that large. At current projections, I will have to trod on for another eight years before my husband and I can afford for me to change to the lower paying career that I want to do. Such a scenario restricts people from charitable or public interest service and traps people into financial binds for too many years.

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While law school itself was very enjoyable, I found little or none of it to apply to the real life practice of law (clerkships too!). The pressures provided were completely different from the practical pressures of the law practice. Seminars on finance accounting and how law firms work are needed!! Also, more legal writing is needed -- take-home essays on a monthly basis. Also money management and loan management seminars and counseling would help. If I had my way, you could get rid of the second two years and make them apprenticeships. For me paralegals seem to be the happiest lawyers.

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There are few opportunities for individuals practicing in solo or small firm settings. Law has become dramatically specialized and
it is difficult to move from one practice area to another.

Income potential for public interest lawyers is very limited compared with private practice -- especially for those starting out as public interest lawyers. I lived under circumstances which 99% of UMLS-graduated attorneys would find shocking -- and loan forgiveness was of little help.

The Law School needs a better mentoring program, especially for those students who came from non-professional families. Not all students had parents who were lawyers and judges. Class is as important as race when selecting students for mentoring.

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Law schools should stress real life procedure, offer clinical programs that are easy to get into (I could not take a clinic until my third year despite numerous attempts during the 2nd and 3rd year. Students should have to represent people on a pro bono basis or some such similar program.

Law school enrollment should be slashed and no new schools accredited in Michigan (and elsewhere). The profession poorly regulates itself and is making it impossible to earn a decent living with a good wage. Furthermore, too many attorneys chasing too few dollars has made the practice quite uncivil.

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The best advice I received in law school was from Prof. Weiler, who read the results of one of these surveys to his class and then told us to do "something different" after law school. I went away to study E.C. law in Belgium for a year.

I would encourage a student to attend law school if he or she could do so without obtaining more than $10K-$15K in loans. I would not go to law school again because the pressure of the debt plus the pressure of work is just too much. Like many grads with loans I feel "trapped" into working in a high stress-high paying job. I didn't have the perspective to understand what I was getting into when I started school.

On the other hand, I do feel that a legal education, in itself, is a worthwhile endeavor. I would encourage a student to attend law school just for the experience, not to "become a lawyer." Unfortunately it is difficult for students to maintain a perspective on the value of a legal education -- in and of itself -- while wading the waters of ego and competitiveness that plague all of us.

The number one benefit of attending UMLS, for me, has been the friends I made.
The best part of law school was the intellectual quality of my classmates and the faculty. The worst part was the total absence of any assistance from the Law School in qualifying one for low interest loans (e.g., NDSL). This occurred because the Law School took into account my parents' income, even though I was financially independent (married with children with a wife in medical school).

Although I enjoyed law school, I found that it didn't adequately prepare me for life as a lawyer. For example, law school students get virtually no training in drafting certain kinds of documents, such as complaints, answers, discovery requests and responses, settlement agreements, etc., which is one of the first things a young lawyer in private practice (a litigator, at least) is asked to do. A course, teaching this or at least attempting to show students how to apply academic concepts to real-life lawyering, would be a welcome addition.

Also, legal writing courses should be expanded along similar lines. Learning how to write an appellate brief is important but not so applicable to the young lawyer, who really needs to know how to write a basic motion or an opinion letter.

I enjoyed my years at Michigan but tuition is too expensive.

I wanted to go to a law school where I could be proud to be an alumnus. I haven't been disappointed. The quality of the faculty, my fellow students and the U of M alumni I meet make me proud to be a Wolverine.

While I wish there had been more time for me to enjoy my law school education and I wish that a top 10 school J.D. would be a more certain ticket to the fast track, these are concerns with law school educations and legal careers in general, rather than any concerns about the program at U. of M.

Law school was something to get through in order to obtain a job. I was distressed by the large classes and the belief that to most professors I was just a body.
Now I find great difficulty in balancing the demands of my job with my family -- the kids (3 years and 3 months) deserve much more time than I am giving them and without my husband's assistance we would not cope well at all. Looking back, I would not go to law school again.

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I found that law school did not really prepare me for life at a law firm. I do transactional work, so I spend very little time in the library or analyzing case law (which is what law school teaches). I had no idea how to draft agreements or negotiate when I started. Also, law school did not prepare me for the stress -- of billable hours, of clients, of high expectations.

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I had a good time at Michigan and keep in touch with a few of my classmates despite distances.

I wish Michigan had done more to emphasize government practice, public interest law, and service to society above all.

My years in the Heartland were good ones.

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I think that women in corporate law practice (transactional practice at a big firm) face real barriers to advancement and that many of those barriers are client generated. While some clients do not mind working directly with women and having a woman manage their account, many others do not want a woman in charge of their account (although working with women on the actual project is fine) or do not want to work with women at all. Some clients will ignore advice given by a female lawyer on the project, but will jump to respond when the same advice (in virtually identical words) is given by a male lawyer. All of this translates into difficulties when women try to bring in business, and (unfortunately) the ability to bring in business is an important consideration in partnership decisions. I have experienced or witnessed several client actions that have made this fact crystal clear to me and it really is depressing.

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Although I have experienced no adverse treatment in government practice, I plan to enter teaching, where it is my perception that I will encounter it heavily. Only time will tell if academia is as merit-based as I have found the government to be.
Some comments:
The amount of hours (billed and non-billed) expected by major law firms is absolutely crushing, particularly if you have a family. I often hear complaints (particularly from older partners) that law school does not prepare students to become lawyers -- but I do not think law schools are to blame. There is no way to prepare for big firm practice, you just have to try it and sink or swim.

I do not know any midlevel associates at firms of any size (50+) who are happy with their balance of work and personal life.

I enjoy being a lawyer, but would like it even more if I did it less.

Law school was pretty useless as a preparation for a legal career. I focus much more on business law (acquisitions, securities) and as a result, there were few classes or practical offerings which would have provided any background for me, except corporate finance.

It basically served as a big placement agency and credential office. Large firms assumed I was of a certain caliber because I got into Michigan. My suggestion is to make law school two years, one year of basic stuff, the 2nd year concentration into area of interest. By third year, most people are just "marking time."

After law school a number of my friends feel tremendous pressure at work without commensurate rewards. The practice has mutated into a real business -- there aren't a lot of professionals at large law firms now.

I have not experienced conscious discrimination from other lawyers in my current place of work (due to gender), but their picture of the ideal associate is a male who oozes drive and self-confidence, and who speaks with a certain amount of arrogance, and who plays on the men's softball team.

I think that the Law School is probably too focused on getting graduates to work at big firms. I have found working at a big firm to be tedious, intellectually boring and extremely constraining. I don't think enough information is available to
law students to allow them to make an educated decision about going to a firm, and I think the Law School encourages the vast majority of students to go to large firms because (1) it's in the Law School's best interest financially and (2) the loan forgiveness program at the Law School is virtually non-existant. I have found working at a firm to be horribly boring -- the work is repetitive, detail-oriented, and young associates have virtually no responsibility. I don't really think it's a job, and it is a job, not a profession, that requires three extra years of study after college. I am planning to leave the law when I find a new job, and I will not return. I also don't think it is a structure which could be radically changed from within, so anyone I met who wanted to "change the world" through going to law school I would discourage.

Our profession, in my opinion, is in trouble. There is too much emphasis on billable hours, on getting to a result, and I have encountered far more sexism (I am a woman) than I expected. If I had it to do all over again, I probably wouldn't, but then, hindsight is always better than foresight.

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I have worked for two large law firms since graduating from the University of Michigan Law School. At each firm there was at least one partner who could only be described as an "asshole." (Recent lawsuits have highlighted this problem.) These individuals are tolerated because they are "important to the firm." This must not be allowed to continue.

Only at a law firm can a person be responsible for millions of dollars in revenue and supervision of numerous subordinates, without receiving any formal management training. Senior associates should ask their firms to send them to management training programs. In today's world it's not enough to be good lawyers, you must also be a good manager.

I'm based overseas and travel over 50% of the time. One attorney I know spent 31 days at home last year. With business becoming more global, I would like to see the results of a questionnaire section focusing on the issues raised by practicing law internationally.

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I really feel that Michigan provides an excellent education but more importantly, makes a great effort to make that education available to a wide variety of people. Michigan does a good job of encouraging public interest work and a sense of community and social justice.
I suppose I was one of the cracked few who truly enjoyed law school -- I relished the opportunity to learn from or butt heads with the truly talented profs (Littman, Syverud, Israel) and managed to avoid and/or escape the duds. Having come from a work environment, I was keenly aware that law school would be a three year vacation from the real world. I was right -- on returning to it, the outside world is more real than ever -- more demanding, more relentless and ruthless.

Of course, 1990 was probably the last year that virtually any one-headed Michigan Law School grad could be pretty sure of a job on exit, so (for me at least) the pressure was off. It wasn't until the class of 1990 met the recession of 1991 that we got a real taste of pressure and the Hobbesian world of lawyers.

Thoughts related to particular questions:

I would be very interested in finding out what portion of my classmates came from divorced families. I did not know anyone else in my section whose folks were divorced. My guess is that relative to the general population, law school (and other higher ed) has a much smaller proportion of children from divorced parents.

I don't intend this to be a rallying cry for admissions policies. However, if this concern is backed statistically, it contributes to the problems of the legal profession not being in touch with the society whose laws it is interpreting, overseeing, and drafting. There are significant and long-lasting impacts associated with divorce, which is now the outcome of 1 out of 2 marriages and the lifestyle for 1 out of 3 children. It is my firm belief that one of the reasons we are becoming an increasingly "lawless" society is that the laws and practices currently in place do not adequately describe our culture.

Unfortunately, I don't have any useful suggestions for how to rephrase these questions which address family life, loan repayment, and income. First, I am happy with my life -- I enjoy my work and I have never had to compromise my personal values; and, I feel part of the community. However, I am certainly not in a position I expected to be in. I am not unhappy, but I would like to be married. Living a life of zero margin of error financially isn't conducive to healthy relationships. Plus, I actually make all the money I want to make, but roughly a quarter of that income goes to loans every month. As a result, I am paying off my loans, but I have virtually no savings. In all likelihood, I would be denied any car loan application I would
make, and have little, if any, hope of owning a home, given my current situation.

I'm long past being upset and mad at myself and the Law School and anyone else who randomly comes upon me. One constructive suggestion is that during the application process, you should include a question as to how the applicant anticipates handling the financial burden. You should explicitly describe the scenario that the applicant will face well into his or her late 30's before the financial consequences of law school are resolved. Is the applicant willing to make these kinds of sacrifices for ideals or later pay-off?

Law school was an education of extremes for me. I had some life-changing classes, like Don Regan's "The One, the Many, and the Good" seminar and the environmental law clinic. I also had classes that were an utter waste of time and money either because the issues were so esoteric or because the professor lacked any ability or desire to teach whatsoever. So ... I spent (and continue to pay) a lot of money for about three to five distinct classroom/clinic experiences.

Despite my concerns, I still would return (I think!) because of things that appear to be at the periphery of what the Law School appears to hold of value. First, as a person, I gained the greatest skills to hone my moral character. The individual's character is the more likely indicator of the kind of practitioner he or she will be, not any knowledge of "legal ethics." Second, I was given the opportunity to practice these personal ethics in a legal setting in law school, Mark Van Putten's environmental law clinic. Mark is human, but he always stressed the importance of being beyond the appearance of impropriety. So many of my other exposures to legal ethics were steeped in "win at any cost." Last, law school was a great way to get to know my father and my late grandfather better. Sharing the same experience has been invaluable -- expensive but invaluable.

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It still is too difficult to succeed in a firm without sacrificing personal/family life. The time commitment that is expected in order to last long-term at a firm is unreasonably high.

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I believe the Law School should concentrate more extensively on encouraging students to work in the public interest or participating in judicial clerkships. Similarly, I think the School should more fully attempt to explain the true nature of
working in traditional large law firms, which I believe are unduly glorified, or at least seem to be by students going through law school.

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This survey fails to ask anything pertinent to my career choice, which was to leave law altogether and enter medical school. I hated being a lawyer and greatly regret having gone to law school.

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I feel I am treated favorably (unfairly so) just for being male in litigation. In comparable situations women do not get presumption of ability that men get -- this is true in adversarial setting but also in client relations.

The large law firm emphasizes profit and excessive work to a degree that amounts to a social pathology. Families are treated as quaint secondary pleasures reserved for when one's work is done. The severe imbalance of family and work in the private legal profession in major cities does far more harm to society than most people recognize. But unless the debt burden is eased and the glorification of money and professional status reduced, this will only get worse.

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The practice of law is nothing like I imagined in law school. Law students need more exposure to the realities of the practice of law. Civil Procedure needs more emphasis! First-year students never realize how important a solid foundation in those rules is while in law school.

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While I realize that Michigan's primary goal is to teach its students to "think like lawyers," I felt very ill-prepared to face the realities of practicing law. Michigan would do a greater service to its students to attempt to prepare them somewhat to face these realities and to make better-informed career decisions.

While at Michigan, I took a lot of very interesting and intellectually stimulating courses. I have no complaints about the quality of the education which I received. I did notice, however, that almost everyone I knew planned to take a job with a large private law firm without knowing much about what such a position would really entail. Specifically, many students went into private civil litigation with a large firm without knowing
what such a practice involves. Most students with whom I have
contact and who have practiced now for approximately 5 years are
very dissatisfied with their current position.
I have spoken with several partners about how valuable a course
on managing a civil case would be. A course that discusses how
to prepare a case for trial, how to conduct discovery, etc. I
realize the Law School may feel that this should be part of the
training which a young associate should receive from a firm. I
believe it would be helpful as a Law School course for several
reasons. First, it would help a student decide whether this is
the type of work a student would like to do. Second, law firms
have increasingly become very competitive places where young
associates are thrown specific projects with very little
understanding of how a specific project affects a case overall.

Perhaps, if such a course were offered, a student would feel a
little more prepared for the early years of practice. If not a
course, perhaps the Law School could implement a mentor program
in which practicing attorneys were paired with students and could
help students analyze career options, positions, etc. and might
even be able to foster a relationship such that a young associate
would have someone outside his or her firm to whom he or she
could turn for advice when he or she receives the assignment:
"Need to send out discovery on the X case Monday, please prepare
interrogatories, requests for admission and requests for
production of documents." Unfortunately, being taught to think
like a lawyer doesn't always help a young associate produce a
good product when confronted with such an assignment and the
usual time pressures of law-firm life.

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1) My only hesitation, were I given the opportunity to decide
whether to go to law school again, would be the stress of the
legal profession. Law school students are little aware of the
demands of the profession; students at schools like Michigan are
probably more susceptible than most to having difficulty keeping
work stresses manageable and not letting them overwhelm private
life.

2) From my experience, and that of my law school friends, I've
learned the importance of finding an area of law or style of
practice that suits me. My classmates and I were often too busy
pursuing all the great opportunities available to us to stop and
consider whether those were opportunities we really wanted to
pursue. Too many of us took prestigious jobs, then realized that
those jobs had little to do with our professional and personal
goals. It is difficult to step off the fast track, if only
because others will tell you you're giving up a promising future.
However, it's important to do something that you find fulfilling
(prestige and high pay are great, but not really fulfilling in
the whole scheme of things, if you are otherwise dissatisfied with your work). A law degree from Michigan opens a lot of doors that are closed to other people -- that doesn't mean, however, that you have to choose the door open to the fewest other people.

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I wish I had taken time to work between undergrad and deciding to go to law school. I don't think I was ready or able to make a good decision at that time. In fact I had no idea what being a lawyer really meant, I just thought it sounded good, and that trying to get into a good law school was a laudable ambition!

I became bulimic within one month of starting law school. I took off a year between second and third year to recover from bulimia. I noticed recently that someone has written a journal article making connections between female law students and eating disorders. I wonder what it was that, combined with my own personality type, created the conditions for me to resort to coping in destructive ways?

At this point, I don't plan on being a lawyer anymore. I might go to school again and get a Masters in Social Work. I'm still trying to figure out what I really want to do. I do know that I don't want to work crazy hours and that my personal happiness is extremely important to me.

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1) George Bush called them "one thousand points of light." Others refer to "random acts of kindness." Whatever the characterization, practice generosity and compassion.

2) Don't wait too long to have children if you desire them. Infertility is a very serious issue and the longer you wait, the more probable it will occur.

3) Let's find a way to put families first in the practice of law. We should not be forced to choose between having distinguished legal careers and healthy, wholesome families.

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Law school does a very poor job of preparing people to be people who practice law rather than just lawyers. The real world of law practice is extremely foreign to the theoretical world of law school. I am sure that many of my fellow classmates went through various traumatic experiences simply because they had no idea how stressful and demanding law practice can be. While I enjoy what I do, my good fortune had more to do with chance than with anything I gained in law school.
Most of my answers reflect my feelings during, after, and as the result of my 2nd and 3rd years of law school -- after I took 2 years off following my 1st year and worked in the publishing industry. My first year, during which I had no clue what I wanted to do with a law school degree and got absolutely no guidance, was MISERABLE. Once I found my direction, I loved school and did well.

I can't recommend highly enough that you begin providing all first years with counselors who will really help them find direction. Many of my friends who just stuck out their 3 years are now floundering, strapped with huge debt but completely unsure about their careers. Who benefits there?

Law school costs too much.
Need more clinics.

I am proud of my experience in law school.
I feel well prepared for legal and other challenges.
Sometimes, I wish I worked harder in law school.
I still haven't found the job I want to do for the rest of my life, though retirement might be a good start.

It is remarkable how little law school prepares lawyers for practice. Most often, the fiction that "the law" is a scholarly pursuit interferes with the resolution of real world issues and problems. Most law professors have no idea what they are teaching, much less how to teach it. At the least, professors should be required to spend some time in practice before and/or while teaching. More desirable, although impossible given ABA accreditation rules, law school should be taught by practicing attorneys. A four-hour state bar association seminar on environmental law is more practical and informative than a semester of Environmental Law at U-M.

This is not to say that I was miserable in law school and am now miserable as a practicing attorney. Rather, I have an abiding sense that the whole process is a racket. College graduates with minimal training can, and do as paralegals, practice law. There is no reason I can see why they should not.
I am of different mindsets about the practice of law. On the one hand, there is much to commend it:
1) I get to spend time reading, writing, and researching, all of which are activities well suited to my talents and temperament.
2) The people whom I represent, and other attorneys in the legal system, are usually interesting people with interesting experiences. They usually have interesting stories to tell. This is not to say that these people are necessarily friendly or good or in any way virtuous -- but they almost always tend to be interesting.
3) In a small-town general practice like mine, there's lots of variety.
4) There is always the opportunity to make at least a small difference for the good in some person's life.
5) It pays better than most jobs, and -- since lawyers are just about anywhere -- I don't have to live or work in a city, but can work in a rural setting. My commute to work leads through one stoplight, takes four minutes or less, and I can ride my bike or walk to work when I feel ambitious.

Nonetheless, I am not terribly happy practicing law. Why? Here are some thoughts:

1) It's too damn much work and stress, and robs me of time I'd like to spend with friends, family, books, exercise, etc. I bet that the majority of people who respond to this survey feel the same way.

2) I can't imagine that I'm worth the money I charge, and wonder if the people who come to me are getting a good deal.

3) Ever hear of a D.H. Lawrence story called "The Rocking-Horse Winner"? It's about a house where the very walls seemed to whisper "money, money, money." Not surprisingly, it wasn't a happy house. In my small firm practice, I worry a lot about getting paid, getting a retainer, delinquent accounts, etc. My performance is in part measured by money -- and at my former firm, it seemingly was entirely measured by money. Not surprisingly, this isn't a recipe for a happy professional life.

4) Yes, folks, at least in the world of small firms, you need to market, "network," and make contacts. I am not inclined to or adept at marketing, networking, and other tricks of the 1990s legal trade. I could blame my lack of preparation for the business end of the law, but the fact is, I'm introverted, don't like getting out and about, and should only blame myself. It helps very much to be a "people person" in my kind of practice.

5) It is not too beneficial to society at large. In my small town private practice, and from my experience with a large law firm as a summer associate, I think the private practice of law
tends to focus on protecting someone's or some business's little
(or big, as the case may be) pile of money. You either protect
the pile from being taken from someone else or try to make the
pile bigger. I used to teach in a public school. Teaching, I
always felt, served a common, public good. Not so, I'm afraid,
with my practice.

6) The fact that the work isn't too beneficial to the public good
exacerbates the drudgery and stress of the work. I mean, if I
could see that my work was making a big difference in the world,
the hours and stress would be more acceptable.

7) It isn't uplifting to deal with a somewhat steady stream of
people who are not happy or mad at someone or the system or
whatever. Sometimes I really am a client's therapist. This is
particularly the case with divorces.

Really, though, from my look at the world around me, there aren't
that many people who love their work. I haven't met many lawyers
who truly enjoy being a lawyer. Most folks work relatively hard,
tolerate their work, and find more satisfaction with their
family, hobbies, ESPN, whatever. In such a world, I should
probably be happy that I'm in a profession that pays better than
most and has the numerous advantages mentioned above.

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My career path has been somewhat untraditional: I worked for a
major law firm for a year and a half, then a small local firm for
a year and a half and then two years ago I joined the staff of a
federal judge. I am extremely satisfied with my job and life at
this point, but I was just as extremely dissatisfied with
practice. The most stress actually resulted from dealing with
the aggressive and self-centered attorneys with whom I worked.
It was quite discouraging to observe their lack of balance and
ethical behavior. Although traditionally law clerks worked with
a judge for one or two years immediately upon completion of law
school, more and more judges are hiring "permanent" clerks. Of
the 21 clerks who work for the judges in my district, ten are
career clerks who were formerly in private practice.

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I fairly quickly became bored and frustrated with my government
job. After two years, I left altogether and went back to school
with the intention of going into medicine. However, given my
interest in Eastern Europe, I moved to Slovakia and began
teaching basic subjects in law. I worked for a private law firm
for a year, and found the practice interesting (joint ventures
with western companies). However, given the political situation
in Slovakia, business went down as human rights concerns
increased. I began to work for the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights in 1994, as Legal Officer for Czech Republic, Slovak Republic and Hungary. I taught, negotiated, and helped Roma (gypsies) lodge police brutality claims. I began working with UNHCR in October, 1994. I enjoy the work, which includes lobbying, counseling, negotiating, and speaking Slovak and Russian. The bureaucracy is a bit much at times, but I think I may have found something in law that I really enjoy. I don't know if I'll return to the States.

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I think the law school should offer a rhetorical theory/polemics/advocacy course. It could draw on a number of classic sources but then segue into modern trial or written advocacy. It would give the fundamentals for meeting all other dispute challenges in life and law school. Law professors claim that they teach law students to think like lawyers. I believe they fail exceedingly on this count. Everything I learned about persuasion as an art occurred either before or after I left law school.

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In my experience, the practice of law is frequently stimulating and generally financially rewarding; only rarely does it satisfy the more rarified aspirations of many of those, including myself, who choose to become lawyers. In this, it perhaps does not differ from most other forms of work so much as the thwarted ambitions of its practitioners distinguish it and may lead to disappointment.

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Practicing law can be very lonely--whether in a big firm or a small one. Being a litigation lawyer is like being a dentist--no one likes to see you coming.

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Paying back the student loans was a far more difficult aspect of leaving school than I had envisioned. (I did not have the luxury of stockpiling money at a New York-type firm, so each month it has been difficult to pay the $500-800 minimum loan payments.) Unfortunately the debt is why I remained in private firms for so many years, despite my dislike of the practice. If I had known this as an entering law student, I would not have attended an out-of-state law school.

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1) I was an "A" student in college, attended Michigan Law School, worked my rear off on "extracurricular activities" (still do), and landed a job with a prestige firm—with a litigation department that relegates women to traditional "female" fields and does not have a single prominent female partner. My husband was an uninspired "low B" student in college (the same one), went to a "nothing" law school, and took a horrible job ($20,000/year in private practice!) several months after graduation after failing to find anything else. BUT—he has litigation experience I would kill for, had his salary raised to the same level as mine after two years, and is developing a great practice. It is hard for me not to conclude:
   (a) forget studying; success in law boils down to networking effectively and getting early experience and
   (b) it really is easier to be a white guy.
2) I strongly believe that people should not go directly from college to be "intellectually stimulated" in law school. Plus, "real life" gives you much needed perspective—especially as to the impact of those loans on your future ability to pay your bills. Student loans truly are "taking out a mortgage on your future." I am so envious of my classmates and colleagues who do not have to deal with this.
3) I still get upset when I think about how much less my "Michigan" classmates paid for their education than I did at our privately-funded law school. Don't send me any fund-raising letters—even when the loans are paid, it is going to be really hard to think of any equities that would support me writing the check.
4) To Kill a Mockingbird is the greatest lawyer movie ever made. Civil Wars was the best lawyer TV show. Presumed Innocent, the best book.

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I found law school life to be insular and, in retrospect, far afield from life in the real world. More practical opportunities (e.g., clinics, externships) ought to be encouraged to bridge the gap with the real world. Otherwise, as law schools go, Michigan is a fine place—good comradery among students, supportive staff, not snobbish.

Student loans are a big problem and create an aura of "indentured servitude" to large commercial firms. In my view, spending $100,000 on a legal education simply isn't worth the money anymore given the pressures of being a modern practitioner and the financial burdens of paying off six digits of debt. We now have a generation of lawyers who cannot afford to purchase homes due to burgeoning debt loads, much less afford to work in meaningful (and less lucrative) jobs. Partnership doors are all but closed due to flat growth. Morale is abysmal.

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Given that the U of M is a public, state-funded University, the effort made to produce lawyers for public service is disappointing. In Michigan, the state Attorney General's office, DNR and local government offices are filled with non U of M lawyers while the big firms (including many out of state firms) have plenty of alumni. My own experience is that the U of M placement service was almost useless for anything but big firm placements.

I think that this is a very poor reflection of the program and that changes need to be made at almost every level including admissions.

I also believe that the law school provided me with a second rate educational experience. What did I get in most of my classes that I could not have gotten from a video tape?

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I presently do not practice law, and I have few regrets in leaving the profession. Most of my peers who remain attorneys do not seem to be very happy, and very few have a true passion for their work. It is unfortunate so many bright, intelligent people remain working in mediocre careers and positions. There are many fundamental problems with today's legal profession.

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While I appreciate the quality-of-life questions, and am interested in the overall results, I hope no one will view them as some sort of mandate for action by the law school or governments. The quality of life of everyone would improve if government would stop attempting to solve what are individual problems and give us back the money it wastes attempting to do so. The law school would do best simply to teach the law, leave a humane amount of personal/family time, and leave students to work out their own individual problems to improve their quality of life.

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The law schools are churning out graduates like it was going out of style. What madness!! Many of these students are recently graduated liberal-arts majors who decide to go to law school because it beats any other post-graduate alternatives they perceive they have.

Law schools should, as many other graduate schools do (either officially or unofficially), require successful applicants for admission to have at least a year (or more) out of school before they can commence legal training. This way, many prospective students would be "weeded out" before the pain of contracts, torts and civil procedure sets in. By the same token, those
who decide to go to law school after all will benefit from the
time off and life-experience. It may also focus their studies,
as, after all, law is so broad.

I am now 30, and while I don't regret for a moment choosing the
legal profession (OK, maybe now and then I do, but rarely), I
only wish I was a bit more worldly than I was the day I, aged 22,
hitched a ride to Ann Arbor to begin a new life.

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The biggest problem with law schools is that they train too many
students. There are too many lawyers and law schools continue to
take on so many students both because of their university's need
for the tuition dollars and for the need to maintain their own
administrative and educational staffs. The students are burdened
with debt, unrealistic expectations and an increasingly
unmarketable degree. Law schools should begin to examine their
culpability also in the litigiousness of our society in the
number of graduates produced who try to make their career pay.
It is imperative for law schools to reexamine their mission in
light of the changes in society and the legal world.

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I would like to state that while my overall experience at Law
School was enjoyable, intellectually stimulating, etc., I was (and
still am) disappointed in the lack of diversity among the faculty
members, not only with regard to race, ethnicity and gender, but
also with regard to work experience. I always had the feeling that
our "prototype" faculty member was a person from a "Top Ten" law
school who was editor of law review and clerked for a federal
appeals court judge, preferably the Supreme Court. Practical
experience did not seem to be an important or relevant area of
inquiry. I also think that the Law School, if it has any
conscience at all, should really try to tackle the issue of how
burdensome student loans can really foreclose many career options
an attorney will have after finishing school.

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I went to law school straight from college, with little idea of
what working in the law actually entailed; I graduated without
learning much more, somehow convincing myself that what I'd seen
hadn't been particularly real. My initial experience at a large
law firm was disappointing. When my firm went bankrupt, I left
the law and tried my hand at a number of other things. I wrote
fiction, and I tried academics. After three years, I returned to
being a lawyer--grateful for my education, much chastened, more
realistic and fairly content. I am starting at the bottom again,
at a very small firm, doing work I would never have considered
before. I accept it as my way back into a profession I've
learned to appreciate. I don't adore being a lawyer these days, but I am optimistic now that I can make something good come out of it.

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I attended law school to study law. I was interested in legal history. It never occurred to me that I might practice law. Practicing law at a private firm had allowed me to pay off my debt quickly (three years in private practice) but now I am at a loss. Attorneys, for the most part, learn from those more senior to them how to be miserable human beings and how to treat others like miserable human beings. Also, working for companies is not, by any stretch, providing a meaningful contribution to society. Moreover, corporations are active participants in the practice of obstruction that is what commercial litigation has become.

My first few years in private practice, I was the only one of my Michigan peers who could honestly say I loved my work. But now I understand mid-level associate malaise. After a few years, you see the people and the practice for what they are. Interestingly, it seems that lawyers learn to treat their junior attorneys fairly well to obtain their loyalty and friendship. Then, at a certain point, the relationship changes when they want to unload responsibility and avoid accountability. At that point, you realize friendship was not what they were interested in...It is not, I realize, peculiar to the practice of law, but it is human nature, and part of the hierarchical work structure.

I have been looking actively for other types of work, including interviewing to become a prosecutor. Some may say working for the government bureaucracy is no better. And indeed, the prosecutors' offices are populated by the very same types of former private practice attorneys that I would love to get away from. So, it may be no solution at all.

I have applied for public interest jobs. No luck there. If you go corporate first, you by definition lack the requisite commitment to public interest.... And, of course, we have many refugees from public interest jobs here at my firm who, understandably, couldn't take any more of the nightmare of low paying jobs and little recognition.

The only arena I've not seriously tried yet is the one I always expected to go into--teaching. But I was not at the top of my class and don't expect I would ever be considered seriously for a professorship.

A number of people from my class have left the practice of law. Those of us that remain wonder where we are to go from here. Get business? Go solo? Leave altogether? And we wonder what the future holds for the practice of law in general, whether public or private. Surely, there is nowhere for it to go from way down
here but up, but I hold no great hopes....

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Puzzling over what to write delayed my initial response. Looking back since graduation, it's difficult to decide what portions of my professional experience are attributable to law school, and what to the vagaries of any complex career. I think the technique and intellectual structure I learned at Michigan has served me well. Not infrequently, when working and analyzing a problem, I feel I can anticipate the way the law or statute probably works—whether from historical, procedural or political forces whose natures we studied in classes. That is a fine gift, given by you all, I suppose.

When I was at Michigan, there were two aspects I found and continue to find unfortunate. The first was the staleness of the lecture format, continued into years 2 and 3. While first-years must absorb massive amounts of new ideas and forms, and arrive eager to take it in any format, 2L's and 3L's would benefit from a healthy mix of courses that have a project-oriented or practicum structure. These would encourage comfort in team-work and balanced skill development—and perhaps even original thought to collect and cement the straws of legal concepts already learned.

My second regret is that while at Michigan I felt propelled into a large firm, having graduated at a time when recruiting was still big business, and small firms and public interest or government work was something of a stepchild in an unattended room down the hall. We were exposed to countless presentations and dog and pony shows by large firms who had crossed the country to hand us brochures and plastic cups of wine. I don't know if they still do that, given today's economic climate, but I hope the placement office has brought in, by invitation or force if necessary, people to talk to students and/or to show them how law is usually practiced, on a personal scale.

I went to a large firm and left, very unhappy, after 3 years. I now practice with seven other attorneys and bear complete responsibility for most of my clients, from retaining to bill-payment, from sympathy to advice they don't want to hear. It can make my stomach hurt and I often wake up worried that I've done the wrong thing, but the artificial dynamics and anonymity of bureaucracy and law firm committees, another subject not touched upon at Michigan, are blissfully absent from my practice. Academic skills have taken me a long way, but enthusiasm, thoughtful work and discretion have taken me further. These all are skills, not nature, which for many of us are first maturely wielded upon graduation.
Thank you for this chance to assemble my thoughts. I am delighted that you seek our opinions—a very good sign for the class of '98.

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First I should note that I was a summer starter, in the class of 1991. I graduated in December, 1990, but still regard myself as being a member of the class of 1991.

I will be very interested to see how my fellow students feel today about "life or law school or whatever." My own law school experience was very mixed; the overall experience was not as intellectual, as philosophically-oriented, or as geared toward "doing good" with one's law degree as I expected and I still feel very ambivalent about law school. I feel less ambivalent about the practice of law in a large firm. I hated it thoroughly, with the exception of a few times when I had ample time to do research on an interesting topic, and the pro bono cases I worked on. My pro bono cases gave me by far the greatest satisfaction of anything I did at the law firm where I worked for three and a half years. I was desperate to leave there, finding the work so stressful, so boring, and so unsatisfying that I was happy to take a huge pay cut to work in legal publishing. My current job is much more enjoyable, but not really intellectually challenging enough to consider making it a permanent career choice.

I hope to find a job working with children's issues—either for a public interest organization, or the government, or possibly a solo practice. I have also become interested in mediation recently, and hope to pursue it as a possible career path.

Suggestions for the law school: The first few weeks of law school should be taught from a perspective of 1) the philosophy of law and the function of the legal system in society, 2) public policy, and 3) the "big picture" with regard to the substantive content of each of the classic first year classes (torts, civil procedure, contracts, property, criminal law, contract law).

From my very first day at law school, in each class we were plunged into the minutiae of extremely specific points of black letter law on one isolated subtopic. This was extremely confusing, because we had no idea how the specific point of law we were examining fit into the subject of contracts (for example) as a whole; nor did we have any idea of whether that specific point of black letter law was relatively important or relatively minor. So we didn't know what to focus on. It was a classic "I can't see the forest for the trees" situation, and I didn't really fight my way out of it until my third or fourth semester. A law school needs to lead its first year students on at least a brief walk around the entire forest before it sets them to memorizing the shape and color each leaf on each individual tree.
Two summer jobs and an internship were enough to make me realize that I didn't enjoy being a lawyer! I haven't practiced since graduation (though I passed the bar and keep up my "inactive" status, just in case!). I opened a business, which I continue to own and operate. Too often I think law school is the choice of intelligent undergraduates who still don't know what they want to be when they grow up! Yes, I'm sure that law school training has been useful in my life inasmuch as I feel capable of solving problems that are presented to me, or for the occasional legal issue. But in retrospect, I wish I had followed my passion instead of the "safe" route of law school.

I enjoyed my law school years very much. Many of the courses I took were not directly applicable to my later practice, but I think the intellectual content was important. I think law students need to think about the reasons and the nature of law and the legal system before they become immersed in the realities of practice. I think instructors should be encouraged to include materials other than the traditional casebooks for class reading, especially current news items. I also think more courses should be taught by (currently) practicing attorneys, so that students can really find out what it is like to be a lawyer.