Class of 1993 Five Year Report Alumni Comments

University of Michigan Law School

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Class of 1993

Responses to open-ended question at end of survey asking for “comments of any sort about life or law school.”

The gap between the Law School’s preoccupation with certain trendy, politically-correct issues and the realities of legal practice (and life in general) is astounding. During law school, I spent a significant percentage of my total study time — perhaps as much as 30% — on political issues like racism, feminism, sexism, affirmative action and a myriad forms of perceived societal injustice. By in large, this time was poorly spent. It is not that the issues themselves are inherently unimportant, but the treatment of these issues by the predominantly liberal academic establishment is superficial, unimaginative, and predictable. More are too many “one-issue” persons among the Law School’s faculty and student body — persons who only purpose in life seems to be to rail against the white male establishment that made institutions like the University — and (for that matter) liberalism — possible. You have simply got to move beyond that sort of faculty and that sort of student to find people who think a little more deeply — and a little more creatively about issues like race and gender. Above all, you need some liberals who think a little more honestly, neutrally, and rigorously about such issues.

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I enjoyed my law school years a great deal. I met a lot of great people who are still some of my best friends.

The only thing that is unfortunate is the incredibly high costs and the amount of debt an individual is forced to incur. The only reason I have the ability to be a prosecutor for $33,000 per year is that my wife (also a Michigan law school grad) works for a large law firm. It is truly a tragedy that the best and brightest young attorneys are often forced from financial necessity to take jobs at law firms. There but for the grace of God go I.

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Law school was a time in my life which I will always remember for its intensity. I never expected the academic challenges to be so demanding or so rewarding. My social interactions with my classmates were also rewarding on an intellectual level, though coming from a lower to middle class background, I sometimes felt slightly removed from the social elite. However, looking back at law school as a whole, I loved it. To borrow a phrase, I sucked the marrow out of life during law school. Rarely have I had that opportunity in my life. Law school changed me, no doubt about it, and my decision to go was a wise one. I
wish, looking back, I would have gotten more involved in extracurriculars and also pursued a joint degree program to give me more flexibility in my career. I also strongly feel that Michigan should make clinics much more accessible, if not mandatory, for its students.

My judicial clerkship, with a State Appellate Court judge, was an ideal first job. I loved my boss, my work, the stress-free environment, and my hours. If only clerkships could last a career and pay better!

Since entering private practice with a medium-sized law firm in Chicago, my life has changed dramatically. I don’t have as much time to spend on my new wife and baby as I’d like, but I feel grateful that I don’t work someplace else where those hours I spend with them would be even less. My job is rewarding in an intellectual respect and I am in the unusual (I would guess) position of actually liking my job and, in particular, my boss. I am concerned about money, as I feel I am underpaid by about $10,000/yr. (At least), but my financial concerns will be alleviated (hopefully) in 5 years, after my wife (currently a student) finishes school and gets a job. I never expected that my student loans would become so burdensome, however. The loomed over me and restrict me from leaving this profession (or finding a job where I could actually help people) until they are paid off, which doesn’t project to be for another 10-25 yrs. I always expected to come out of Michigan, work my tail off at a large firm for 5 years, pay them off in full, and then think about going to a smaller firm. But marriage, fatherhood, and peace of mind changed all that. In any event, the bottom line is that I’m happy, both with my family and my job, though the debt hangs over me in my more gloomy days. My decision to go to Michigan Law School is one I’d make again. In a heartbeat.

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I thought Michigan Law did little to make me a good first-year lawyer, but it laid a great foundation for growth and development. My supervisors frequently comment that I know a lot about diverse areas of the law, which is because I took a wide variety of law courses, all of which were well-taught.

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The secret to success, I think, is to do excellent work, make yourself invaluable, yet insist on your own personal space and time. If your current firm won’t accede to your demand to have a fulfilling life outside of the law as well as within it, change jobs. Repeat as often as necessary, and you will find other lawyers who want to balance making money with professional and personal fulfillment.

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The law school has lost some very valuable professors - the greatest loss being Kent
Syverud. It is my understanding that not enough is being done to attract and retain quality professors.

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Working in a public defenders office is far more satisfying than working in a big (civil) law firm because I believe in what I'm doing. However, I find it far more stressful in some ways. Knowing that my client's life is literally on the line (I do death penalty cases exclusively) makes it hard to leave work at the office.

Fortunately, my work at the Family Law Project in law school helped prepare me for truly high stakes cases. I STRONGLY recommend that any student considering a public interest career try to work at the FLP and, if possible, serve in a leadership position there.

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Wish I had kept in touch with more classmates. Wish I had been encouraged to do clerkships and wish I had known more about the legal profession, my career options.

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Although I had average grades at a very good law school (over 3.0 GPA) being at Michigan made me feel stupid, unqualified and inept at various times. In some part, it was specific professors who made comments to me about my abilities, in other part it was the grades I received or treatment I received (i.e., wanting to be a research and writing teacher for case club but being turned down). It was extremely difficult for me to be confident in myself and my abilities when surrounded with all the negativity. I lost all motivation to even try during my last year and a half (I was a summer starter). I basically gave up on school, doing only the minimum to get by. I hated school, thought the selection of professors very minimal, and considered grading to be largely arbitrary. I couldn't wait to leave Michigan law school.

What's more, I found the degree from Michigan to be largely irrelevant in my field of practice (private criminal defense) and my geographic location (the Twin Cities of Minnesota). I have, on numerous occasions since leaving law school, regretted incurring all that debt for the often miserable experience of going to Michigan.

I think there was not enough focus going in about how much debt I would end up with, and what that would mean practically to my finances when I graduated. I also believe the career services were mostly ineffectual for someone looking for public interest or small-firm practice.

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I have a new baby and I'm very nervous about trying to integrate work and family,
largely because the workplace culture demands so many hours. I don’t know if this is unique to law or not...

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I would urge women in law school who think they may want children to speak to lawyers who are mothers about the demands of parenting and pregnancy and how these must be balanced against work. The demands of private practice are, I think, greater than most students expect, and the demands of motherhood are much greater than most women expect. It would be nice to help young women see what they are getting into beforehand. Perhaps some would choose a less demanding legal career, where it will be possible to balance work and family, rather than choosing private practice where so many of us have felt we had to give up one or the other.

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Although I am proud to say that I went to Michigan, two aspects of law school were negative for me.

First, until the end of law school, I never felt that I mastered the art of taking the law school exam. I always studied real hard, but my grades never seemed to be reflective of the effort I had put into learning. The cumulative toll of expending significant effort yet receiving less than stellar grades was stressful.

Second, I disliked the Socratic method and calling on people generally. I think I tended because of it to focus more on class preparation than on understanding the “big picture” concepts which I would need to grasp in order to receive high grades on the exams. In many ways, I probably would have scored higher grades had I missed a bunch of classes and stayed home studying commercial outlines. Instead, I made my best effort to attend all classes and attempt to learn through class. Judging by my grades, I’m not sure I “learned” the right things.

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Although law school was very interesting to me, I have found very little of what I learned at law school to be of use to me in practicing law. There is such an emphasis on learning how the law evolved that you lose where the law ended up along the way. Moreover, I thought there was insufficient time or emphasis placed on skills which should be useful post-law school, such as writing, researching and (especially) negotiation. Perhaps you can learn these things on the job, but law school is a professional school which should leave you in a position where you can practice competently when you leave. Had I not gone to a large law firm after graduation, I doubt I would have been able to render even basic legal services without committing malpractice on a weekly basis. Other professions have actual training built
into either classes or a mandatory apprenticeship program following graduation. If law is not to have a residency requirement as in medicine, or an articling requirement, as with Canadian lawyers, than this should be provided to a greater degree in law school.

More generally, I know very few classmates or colleagues who are happy being lawyers. Only those who became faculty seem to still enjoy the profession. I find it ironic that people seem to universally like making lawyers (at least those who can get academic jobs), but so few like actually being lawyers. There is too much stress and too many hours, little appreciation from the public (and often from clients) and not enough enjoyable parts of the job to offset the miserable ones. It is difficult, if not impossible to escape whatever pigeonhole you happened to land in when you got your first job, no room for a significant change of responsibilities without abandoning law altogether. The majority of classmates I knew were either no longer actively practicing or remain lawyers either because they are still paying off debt or have not yet decided what to do instead.

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Law school was ungodly boring. If it weren't for the clinics, I would have dropped out.

The best thing that came out of law school was my husband – a classmate.

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While sensitive that the focus is to maintain an academic, rather than vocational, institution, I am convinced nevertheless that the breadth of training law students receive should be monitored to include more practical experiences that better relate to the practice of law. Taking contracts (the class) does not help students understand if they would enjoy, or have an aptitude for, drafting. Civil Procedure classes do not convey what motion practice is like. Learning the rules of evidence gives little practical knowledge on how to conduct an examination.

Whenever possible, therefore, I would graft practical experiences that teach substance through practice on to the existing curriculum. Drafting a contract addressing tricky issues raised by an argument would enrich a contract class. Learning what a motion for summary judgement is by drafting one using a packet of pleadings and discovery excerpts, and finding the case law would be enormously helpful in clarifying otherwise murky concepts learned in a casebook and the classroom.

Like it or not, Michigan Law students end up practicing law in, I suspect, the overwhelming majority of cases. If Michigan would concentrate on giving students some divergent skills they needed to start practicing law, their advantage in confidence would be a boon both to them and the school.

Finally, I offer two more random thoughts:
1. Writing is the modern lawyer’s most important skill – help students hone this skill
2. I regard the preaching, politically correct attitude of the law school administration - and the result of Balkanization of students on the basis of ethnicity, gender and sexual preference - as the most disappointing aspect of my time at Michigan. Michigan should make excellence the principal characteristic by which its students identify themselves.

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I would recommend that the law school devote additional attention to the following areas:

1. My impression is that most large law firms devote little attention to the development of their associates' careers. At the same time, there is a set of challenges that all young associates face in trying to make their ways in these firms, which the law school could do much more to help its students meet. Without discussing specifics (a subject for a separate study), it seems to me that a law school that routinely sends most of its graduates to large firms should spend a great deal of time in the second and third years trying to give its students some knowledge and tools to assist them in navigating through the first several years of big-firm practice.

2. After several years of practice, I am impressed with the importance of the distinction between litigation and transactional work - in terms of the skills they call upon, the types of personalities they favor, and the types of satisfaction they bring. The law school experience currently gives students virtually no exposure to the transactional side of legal work. I would recommend that the law school make a concerted effort to help its students understand what these two branches of legal work entail, as big firm practice usually demands a choice between them, which can have a very big effect on job satisfaction.

3. Finally, one general comment. I was generally satisfied with my law school education, am convinced that lawyers provide an important service, and have not given up on the idea that the practice of law could be a satisfying career. Nonetheless, my overwhelming impression after four years of practice is that the private practice of law is an extremely difficult field in which to build a career that meets most people’s requirements for personal satisfaction and fulfillment. My feelings towards the U of M law school would be more positive if I perceived a greater recognition of this fact on the part of the law school, and a greater commitment to helping its students find a satisfying life in the law.

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I did not enjoy attending law school at the U of M as much as I believe I would have if it were not such a blatantly, nearly militantly, liberal-leftist environment. Yet, I do have to thank the law school for opening my eyes to the terrible shortcomings of that philosophical/political viewpoint. I was daily amazed at the misbegotten arrogance of the many professors and members of the school administration, who through comments and innuendo ridiculed everything that has made America great. There was a consensus among
many students that the impression we received from these individuals was that if you are not a minority and dare hold traditional values you are viewed as a Neanderthal.

I hope the school will come to its senses one day and simply teach the law and not try to cram liberalism down everyone's throat. I see some positive steps have been made.

There is more to tell, but I have expended both my paper and my time. In your race to embrace everything and everyone, I hope you will no longer trample over the views of a large portion of your students who have decided it's far simpler to take a stand at the ballot box and in one's community after obtaining a law school diploma than to take on an additional headache during law school.

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I never expected to enjoy life as much as I currently do! Life after full-time practice is rewarding, exciting, and liberating. However, family and friends are what makes life as rich and exhilarating as it now is for me.

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I count my years at the law school as very special ones in my life. The intellectual challenge and quality of instruction exceeded my expectations. I consider it an extremely worthwhile undertaking and investment.

My education at the law school combined with work experience, maturity and ambition helped me onto the fast track at a large Michigan firm. I helped build a national telecommunications package, made partner in two years and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I and another partner withdrew from that firm last year to open a Chicago office and merge with a firm with a complementary practice and client base.

I am now managing partner of a small but growing office, have a national telecommunications practice, was recently asked to join the faculty for the PLI Cable Law Update, and experience a high level of job satisfaction. My choice of profession has panned out; my law school experience has helped that happen. Thanks!

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The "New Section" was extraordinary. It should be recognized as an ideal model for law school.

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I regularly work with law students and recent graduates. Very rarely do they understand the role of the attorney in a matter, as opposed to a business person or policy person. It seems to me that graduates should understand, upon graduation, what it is they are
expected to opine on and what decisions they should defer to others.

Also, I have not yet met a law school grad who can write an acceptable legal memorandum. This is the first and most basic task asked of recent grads, but none can perform it adequately. Nor, I should note, could I. I realized this is difficult to teach in a setting other than a one-on-one, multi-revision process, but schools must do more in their area.

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I am a criminal defense attorney. I have my own office in Hartford, Connecticut. I am in court 4-5 days per week. The types of cases I handle are sale of narcotics, assault, larceny, burglary, violation of probation, forgery, arson, and attempted murder. I also handle the occasional personal injury case. I am what my clients refer to as a “street” lawyer (my clients say this with pride). I find my work challenging and stimulating, and take a great deal of pride in my work.

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When I started law school, I never intended to work for more than 5 years after graduation. I figured that by that time I'd be married and be home full-time raising children. My purpose in going to law school was not to become a lawyer. Rather, it was solely to get a legal education. I practiced for just under 3 years, I’ve been married for just over 3 years, and I have been a stay-at-home mom for 2 years. So, things have worked out just as I had hoped. Life is good.

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Working at a law firm continues to be demanding to the point of limiting one’s ability to have a healthy family life. It is especially difficult for women associates. While maternity leave is available (usually 3 months), associates who take the full maternity or paternity leave are set back in the partnership track for an entire year and with each new child it sets women (any participating male associate) further back. Even so associates are having children earlier in their careers, they are going home early and working from home in the evening. The fact that the chances of “making” partner are becoming increasingly slim makes it easier to sacrifice ones “career” in order to be home more. Young associates can only hope that if they specialize in areas that are in demand, once the “baby boomers” retire there will be many positions available in the partnership tracks of firms. Many of my colleagues as a result are focusing less on reaching billable hour goal and more of networking with old and new friends and acquaintances.

As a person of color in a law firm and as a woman I find that it is clear that white males are more likely to attract the attention and favor of white male partners and, despite our hard work and long hours, we are little noticed or commended for our efforts. So, while it may be
far easier for the time being for blacks, Latinos, and women to receive an offer for a coveted associate position, once we are in the job it is harder for us to be seen as an equal to the white male partners with greater influence.

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There is discrimination, or at least disparate treatment, by older/more established attorneys due to my age. The most serious discrimination is an age and gender combination: “I don’t know how long you have been practicing law (honey) but this is how things are done.” This is a comment I and other colleagues of my approximate age (29) hear on a regular, almost weekly, basis.

It has taken several requests from you to get this back – not because I didn’t want to do – I completed most of it the first time – but as time passed, so many emergent problems arose that it got put on the back burner.

Thank you for your persistence.

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Thank god there is life after Law School! I have enjoyed practicing law immensely – but it has been very difficult to get over the hurdle of low grades in Law School. Luckily, I knew the area of law I wanted to specialize in and was able to build up experience in this area, and then market this experience. It was also helpful to have worked prior to attending Law School. I had been very successful professionally prior to Law School – and knew I could be successful again after Law School – but the three years of Law School were a definite low point – I never figured out how to take the exams. If I did well, I had no idea why – I also never figured out what was being tested? And why? Or why in that manner? In retrospect, I still think there is not much connection between law school teaching methods and learning. During law school, it felt like a very out-dated and ineffective teaching method – dinosaur-like – and not fun! I have a great deal of respect for many of the professors I had and administrative staff, and am grateful for the openness and willingness to help me (and others) in any way they could. I am also grateful to have had the opportunity to spend time with the amazing students – from the U.S. and all over the world!

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The law school should do whatever it can to emphasize the importance of legal writing. I have encountered many law students from Michigan, as well as other top law schools, who have extremely weak writing skills.

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I deeply regret having attended Michigan Law School for a variety of reasons not the least of which is the hideous corrugated steel patches of the back of the law quad (and the “mobile home” connecting two of the buildings). Can you fix that?

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As a lesbian law student, I was distressed about how hostile I felt law school students were (I always thought the faculty was more progressive than the student body).

There should be a rebuttable presumption that students work for at least a year between undergrad and law school. I felt most of my fellow law students lacked the depth of character and the maturity to practice law with integrity and compassion.

I prosecuted domestic violence for 3 years and walked away from a good income because I could not reconcile the need to not care about the cases or to spend all my time at work – neither alternative was acceptable.

I should note that I was well-treated by my judge when I clerked and the prosecutor’s office even as an “out” lesbian – it can be done. Although I had my office politics difficulties, I never felt that sexual orientation was the problem.

I know very few happy lawyers. It is not clear if I will stay in law, though I do enjoy the possibility of making a (slight) difference.

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I found law school to be extremely rewarding intellectually and really enjoyed my law school experience. I was also fortunate to meet my wife in law school which made law school a truly wonderful experience.

I have also enjoyed the practice of law. While it is extremely stressful it also provides great challenges every day. I really enjoy being a “counselor” to clients and providing advice to individuals and businesses as they go through major changes and need guidance as they go through major business and life changes.

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I am a career clerk for a federal district judge. I have had three clerkships, including this one, since graduating.

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I entered law school with the goal of working as a public defender, and I have achieved that goal.

I love my work, and feel lucky for it. Most of my friends from law school who work in large corporate firms hate their work. Most of my friends in Legal Services/Public
Interest/Environmental law, love their work.

There is a pattern here. Although I am pleased that steps have been made to increase the public interest resources at the law school (such as hiring Rob Precht and Andrea Lyons) I think much more could be done.

The Law School should consider subsidizing Public Interest/Governmental organizations visits to the school. (My office, and others, cannot afford to visit for interviews like the big firms.)

I am one of the rare people who liked law school, and who benefitted from it enormously, both professionally and personally. I often feel strange admitting this to others, for they are suspicious of someone who actually liked it. But I believe that it was, to a large degree, my own focus and effort that helped to accomplish this. Sometimes I enjoyed myself in spite of the lame professors and their small-minded pedagogy. (But I guess that did prepare me for lame small-minded judges, just like they said it would.)

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I feel that my being a white male is held against me by some people. Those people treat minorities and women better than they treat me, solely because I'm a white male.

I wish everyone would treat everyone else nicely, without regard to gender or race.

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I never thought that I would see a situation where the “uncivil” litigators were 40-something males. I was always told that it was the “new generation” that was causing all the problems. Nothing could be further from the truth. The level of inappropriate, obstructive, hostile and unprofessional conduct I see on a far-too-frequent basis comes from often “successful” attorneys in this category. I look forward to their retirement.

I also see a lot of unequal treatment toward men and women with children within the firm. A few years ago, a woman in our office who was 6 months pregnant was working until 10 pm frequently, while a man, one year her junior, whose wife was pregnant left at 5 pm or took 3 hour lunch breaks to rest because he was not getting enough sleep. Closer tabs on the hours worked also appear to be kept on women attorneys and they are expected to do more clerical work. Women also work longer hours.

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The mentoring program through the women law student's association at Michigan was very valuable. I still keep in touch with my mentor.

I feel that I've been hugely lucky to avoid the “rat race” that I see a lot of my classmates in. The way I did it was by going to grad school immediately after law school – with a masters in environmental policy, a lot of non-law firm doors were open to me.
Also very valuable was taking non-law classes while at U of M – in particular the course I took at the School of Public Health was enlightening.

What I hated at Michigan was the emphasis on law firm employment – all the lip service to “public interest” paled in comparison to those hordes of law firm recruiters who swarmed campus each fall.

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I have very mixed feelings about my law school experience at Michigan. On the one hand, I think I received a first rate legal education. On the other hand, I can’t help but feel there was something missing and its taken some years to think it through. I think, in hindsight, that what was missing (at least for me) was “context.” What I mean is that certainly “law” is not something that simply appeared spontaneously thousands of years ago. Certainly it has a purpose and is shaped and re-shaped by mores and beliefs and interaction with other legal systems, etc. Certainly, there is a history of law – take constitutional law, for instance, that is important, perhaps critical, to an appreciation of what law is and why its important. But none of this was a part of the legal education at Michigan, and I think we all missed out a great deal of education. I would wholeheartedly endorse and support a law and society course in the future and variations on that theme as well.

Now, a word about the people, the students in particular. I’m not sure how to express how very disappointed I was in the personalities of many, many of my classmates. Wow, what a group of monsters they were. Immature, closed-minded and consistently unpleasant – these are the words that come to mind 5 years later. Someone has to do a better job picking and choosing among candidates. I doubt I will ever attend a reunion for this reason.

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I had a great time in law school. I am having a wonderful life now!

I am concerned the quality of the faculty may be slipping. It is also disconcerting to see the law school’s national ranking fall.

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I think my wife and I had opposite law school experiences. I got excited about law school and Michigan during my first semester. My wife hated it. Five years later, my wife is still angry about the placement office. It ignored rudely those people who needed the most help during those difficult job market years of the early 90’s. I still hear J.J. White’s voice in my head when I am negotiating or thinking through a business issue or Jerry Israel’s voice when I analyze a legal point. They were profoundly influential in my development as a lawyer. I worry that our next generation of profs, doesn’t hold up to them.

If I were to do it over again, I would have gone for an MBA. As I now try to shift
from the practice of law to a business position, I find a lot of anti-lawyer bias. Business people seem to think that lawyers are primarily risk adverse achievers. They have obviously not been served well. I think that the law schools needs to try and prepare people for a business practice as well as litigation. I am running our first year training week and the theme is that law school doesn’t prepare you to be a business lawyer, so we will.

My wife’s story is different – one of arrogant and unhelpful people who destroyed her passion for the law that she had had since she was young. She always wanted to be a lawyer – I didn’t. She is much happier now, outside of the law, but she will always resent Michigan Law, as do many of her friends.

So, I’m not sure if this is what you wanted – a tale of two people who went to Michigan Law at the same time and had nearly opposite experiences. I do really worry about the future of the school – Profs. JJ White, Israel, Kamisar, St. Antoine, Kahn, Sandalow, Kauper – the men who built our reputation are all at or near retirement. The people who could have kept us on the map – Larry Kramer, Kent Syverud, Joel Seligman, etc. – have headed elsewhere.

Good luck with this project. I hope that you can make sure that more people at Michigan have experiences like mine with professors that cared about me and about teaching. And fewer, if any, people who have experiences like my wife’s.

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-first semester should not be graded
-grade point averages should be rounded to the tenths place to determine honors.
-best friends met in law school
-very few people I know like being a lawyer
-I’m glad I went to law school, no desire whatsoever to be a lawyer though.
-Most Important, I’m curious if there is enough postage on the return envelope.

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I was much happier at law school when between semesters of my second year, I decided to take classes that I wanted to, rather than classes that I was “supposed” to, i.e. classes that would prepare me for the bar. Consequently, I never took Evidence or Jurisdiction. Evidence, in particular, would be important to my current practice, but I do not regret that for a moment. I learned what I needed to learn for the Bar from by bar review class. Also, taking classes outside the law school was a wonderful part of my law school experience.

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Case Club/writing & Advocacy does not adequately prepare students to do legal research or write.
Besides being a time of great intellectual challenge, I am one of the lucky few who had a wonderful time and lots of fun in law school. I am still close to many classmates from across the country and we see each other often – meeting in different cities or on foreign vacations. I speak often and lovingly of U of M and Ann Arbor and am a very proud alum.

I found much of law school to be very stressful and demoralizing. At the same time, I consider surviving and graduating from law school to be my greatest accomplishment and one of the most influential factors in my life.

I’ve enjoyed practicing law more than I enjoyed learning about it. I think I would be a lot more satisfied in my career had I not relocated to New York City from the Midwest in the middle of my second year of practice. NYC practice (both large and small firm, I’ve done both) is particularly trying due to the high demand for billable hours and the generally ruthless manner in which lawyers, judges and the court system users treat each other.

Finally, although I was able to pay off all of my loans ($56,000), I was able to do so only because I left my Minneapolis firm to take a mega-firm job in New York City for far more hours, stress, etc.

Since switching from the practice of law to one in which I feel a natural ability, I have been in steady demand by potential clients, and as a result both my income and my self-esteem have risen dramatically. It is very liberating and scary to ski outside the ropes, after going through all that is required to be a licensed attorney. In retrospect, however, I would not have done things much differently.

Perhaps I would have taken some risks sooner. Every career risk I’ve taken has paid off more than the one before.

I think back on that person struggling to meet insane billable hour requirements, with little training, reporting to tyrannical bosses, making a fraction of what I am now, completely overloaded with stress and boredom, and am amazed that I put up with it all, let alone for two years. What amazes me even more is that some of my colleagues have been putting up with it for much longer than I, admit they are miserable, yet do nothing about it.

As I said in the Professional Development Survey last year – Law school is great intellectual training. To this day, I relish my interaction with top minds at UM, both student and faculty. They taught me to examine my preconceptions and
forced one to shore-up my own thinking skills.

However, law school should be more than that: specifically, it should provide useful skills (besides a proof-of-purchase, called a diploma). I know this rankles many in law schools, particularly elite ones such as UM, where the clientele pride themselves on pondering “deep” questions to the exclusion of sullying their hands with applications. (Yes, there is a need for omphaloskepsis, but it goes too far. See F. Rodell, GOODBYE TO LAW REVIEWS/K. Larsen, SCHOLARSHIP AMOK.)

Let’s face it: the vast majority of students (even at UM) do not spend dollars and years to learn the niceties of deconstructionism. That most faculty members do treat law school as their intellectual sand box testifies to the misdirection of legal education. Law school, as with other professional programs, is a white-collar trade school – and should be. Look at medical school: they teach real skills, provide their students with plenty of hands-on experience, and do not waste resources debating “advanced feminism,” “environmental racism,” or similar such stale rot from the academic hothouse.

On a more specific note: a common frustration I noted among my classmates at UM was with the flippancy exhibited by the faculty toward grades, jobs, etc. The majority of professors clearly did not want to be bothered with such, and exhibited demonstrably little effort towards exam scoring. Nor (with some notable exceptions – e.g., Prof. Cooper) would they really explain before or after what, exactly, they were looking for. I could write a book on this.

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Law is not as welcoming to women or as accepting of part time/flexible family arrangements as I had hoped/been led to believe, although my firm has been fairly supportive it isn’t easy.

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One thing this survey has reminded me of is how immature I was during my law school years, and with four years’ work experience under by belt prior to enrolling, I was among the more “seasoned” students.

This immaturity manifested itself in at least 2 ways:

a. A completely unrealistic view of how my law school loans would dictate life decisions. I can’t say I wasn’t warned by Kathy Gottschalk, et at.; I just wasn’t willing to listen. If I had just one piece of advice to give to students, it would be that taking out the full raft of loans will almost certainly keep you in your first job longer than you want to be, and will keep you from choosing more attractive opportunities for years thereafter. I don’t know if a pie chart demonstrating percentage of disposable income taken would have helped, but it’s a start.

b. The complete disconnect between proposed fields of practice upon enrolling (even
during 3rd year) and ultimate position now. This has been largely positive for me; I now never underestimate the power of serendipity. Nevertheless, I don’t think the culture of the law school encouraged students to explore alternatives to careers as litigators, be it in private practice or public interest.

One other thing – I truly value my experience at Michigan.

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I was very successful at my law firm – but it is an extremely difficult life. I practiced on the East Coast in a very driven, fast-paced environment. I was constantly vacillating between hating my life and my career and loving my ability to succeed. I am very good at what I do, as are all of the U-M colleagues with whom I keep in touch. I really do see a difference in the training we received, and I am grateful for it.

I now work in a highly rewarding, relatively decent paying ($76,000) government job. I travel, help out indigent individuals and hospitals – and I’m back in San Francisco. In short, life is good. Despite the current level of happiness, I feel paralyzed by my student debt. I don’t feel that I have the freedom to choose a number of different paths because of my need to make a certain amount of money. I am very lucky to be where I am, many do not have this option. Yet, part of me wonders whether I should seek a corporate position – as I am more of a super performer than is my husband, and I sometimes feel that I will need to be the ultimate breadwinner. On the other hand, I worry about not being able to simplify my life when and if a child comes into the picture.

When I look at friends who went to business school, I sometimes reel at the relatively low stress, high benefit/pay situations they are in – and I wonder at my choice.

Yet, I loved law school and feel the education was incredibly useful.

Prior to obtaining this position, I had reached a point of abject misery. Many of my friends are the same. Three of my closest friends have recently made the leap to "in house" positions.

Law firms are not the pot of gold they once were. No guarantees, no matter how hard you work. In the end, it’s frequently all about connections family wealth – the ability to bring in business because of your contacts. Very disconcerting. The good lawyers are abused and overworked and overlooked – except for occasional empty words of gratitude) while the dolts who play golf and have family money are continually counted. It’s a harsh reality. In addition, law firms are so ridiculously bottom-line oriented that they essentially discourage good legal thought and approach. The gentility of the profession is no longer feasible. I find that terribly disappointing.

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I loved law school intellectually – in the classroom, that is: I found the exams to be at
once ridiculously enigmatic and unfairly overweening in importance. Most professors were kind, interesting and – even if dogmatic or unwilling to question their own insights, at times – very stimulating. I loved attending all my classes, and never skipped/slept through them. I loved the courses in which papers were assigned. No doubt it’s not coincidence that I, an otherwise undistinguished student, always performed extremely well in the “paper,” as opposed to the “exam,” courses. Further, I found after my first year that certain professors clearly regarded students who had received high marks and/or were on law review as the only students whose comments were to be encouraged and considered. This was disappointing, especially in light of their frequent side remarks about the somewhat “arbitrary” nature of grades.

Socially, I dated a man in the Philosophy department and found his colleagues in graduate school to be far superior in interest and intellect to our peers in law school. Does that sound snobby? Well, what I mean is that they (the philosophers) seemed much more willing to entertain serious discussions that brought in a spectrum of views, particularly those from beyond the typical liberal left. Law school students were, for the most part, either stuffy conservatives (who couldn’t wait to get to D.C. or Chicago, for god’s sake) or middle of the road, middle of the grade kids who hadn’t entertained a change of thought since middle school – debating class, no doubt. Even the ones who were deemed “brilliant” seemed fairly pedantic and pedestrian, to me. But that of course is as viewed from afar. Once one didn’t “make” law review, one was out of whatever passes for the intellectual mainstream. This of course is a position reinforced (as I’ve said) by the faculty. And not to anyone’s surprise – most of them had jumped (brilliantly) through the same hoops to get to their positions, too. Important to sustain the structures upon which one depends. But I thought these might have been some leeway. (There was – the seminars did give one a chance to interact more closely with professors, as it were, to be heard. But alas, what a shame to perform so sell after the all important-law firm offers had been sent out?)

I did love what I learned in law school, though. As an adamant sort of English major (can’t you tell from my dogmatic writings?), I had formerly eschewed (self consciously, foolishly) learning about the world – politics, history, economics, etc. I don’t know when I became so deeply drawn to this other side of affairs; nor can I say what compelled me to a sense of commitment to its pursuit. All I can say is that the hunger was awakened and, if not appeased, at least somewhat shaped, and [unreadable] by law school. I am grateful for that.

I didn’t enjoy practice. I now work for a private college as a major gifts officer in the development office. I love working for an educational institution; I love thinking about the great policy issues facing educators today. They abound! I hope to complete a doctoral degree – perhaps in some combination of law and literature – and to continue to think and, I hope, to write about the things that spark my interest. I wish I had mastered the art (if such it is) of the law school exam: it would have greatly facilitated my admission to grad school. If I regret anything, it is that lack of acuity that I would have wished for. But can one learn such an art? I asked all by professors, and none could say so. And it troubles me to this day!
Encourage or provide practical experience (mandate clinical practice?)
Skip Con Law in First year; make it a 2nd year course.
Change writing program – I came out of 1st year thinking I couldn’t write, but am now considered the best writer in the firm. Unfortunately, I think I learned legal writing as a judicial law clerk. I think legal writing needs to be integrated into other 1st year courses. Perhaps memos and briefs should be required in Civ. Pro, Crim. Law, Contracts, etc. – maybe this would help. Also, there should be more faculty input in legal writing course.
Encourage Law Review and other journals – perhaps require each student to submit potential publication – Writing is invaluable in litigation.
Emphasize negotiation skills – these are required daily, even intra-office.
Provide sample exams to first year students early on – students whose parents or siblings went to law school have a huge advantage over other students, and first year grades can be skewed simply by lack of proper preparation. Sometimes it seemed a school as great as U of M just assumed everyone had parents or siblings that had attended law school.

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Let’s hope the next 10 years go better.
(It’s hard getting out of the temp pool with neither family connections nor good grades from U. Michigan.)