

Tips for Finding Fulfillment During Law School and Beyond

by Neta Borshansky and Meredith O'Keefe

As law school career professionals, we know that students face pressures that may cause some to lose touch with the goals that motivated them to pursue a law degree. In this article we build on Alexa Shabecoff's August 2015 NALP Bulletin article, "How to Have Happy Law Students and Lawyers." Shabecoff succinctly summarized a 2015 study, "What Makes Lawyers Happy?: A Data Driven Prescription to Redefine Professional Success," by Lawrence S. Krieger and Kennon M. Sheldon (83 *George Washington Law Review* 554, 2015), highlighting factors that highly correlate with law school and lawyer life satisfaction. Following are some tips we have derived from Krieger and Sheldon's study for law school professionals to share with students to help them stay connected to their personal and professional goals and cultivate a fulfilling career.

1. Focus on intrinsic motivators.

During law school, you routinely face decisions about coursework, summer jobs, journals, clinics, clerkships, and more. These decision-making opportunities can empower you to tap into what you most highly value and want to prioritize rather than what others may deem important. When you are struggling to make a decision, here are some questions to help you identify your internal drivers:

- Why did I come to law school?
- What lawyers do I know who inspire me and why?
- What post-grad job opportunities have I heard about that excite me?

- What books, articles, and films have ignited my passions and interests?
- What volunteer work do I gravitate toward?
- What is my mission in law school and in my career? (Write out a mission statement.)

2. Build community.

Having a sense of relatedness with those who share common values is a critical component to satisfaction. Cultivate this sense of community through the following:

- *Clinics, pro bono projects, and student groups.* Participate in clinics and pro bono work as a way to meet other students and practitioners who value public service and who share your passion for particular advocacy areas.
- *Conferences and retreats.* The Equal Justice Works Conference and Career Fair is an invaluable way to connect with like-minded law students while attending workshops and inspiring keynote speeches. Talk to your career counselor about other social justice and practice area specific conferences nationwide.
- *Mentors and informational interviews.* Connect with staff or faculty members and conduct informational interviews with attorneys whose careers you would like to emulate. With a bit of effort an informational interview may evolve into a lasting professional relationship. Mentors can be a source of support when you may be questioning your long-term goals.

3. Develop a sense of unique competence.

There is no single formula for success in law school. It's helpful to take stock periodically of your strengths so that you can harness them, let them bolster your confidence, and use them to define your sense of individuality and competence. A strengths-based approach to charting your law school path involves focusing on work that comes naturally, that energizes you, and that you do well.

Reflect on your path to law school and your experiences thus far. Do you feel most confident, for example, about your writing, client work, research, oral advocacy, conflict management, facilitation, or organizational skills? Where have you added the most value during pro bono projects? If you had prior work experience, in what areas did you excel? Thinking outside the traditional framework of legal skills can also help; would you describe yourself as creative, curious, open-minded, courageous, persistent, enthusiastic, generous, socially intelligent, team-oriented, a good leader, someone who has good judgment? These are some of the skills that Peterson and Seligman evaluate in their VIA strengths assessment, which is available online at www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu.

Know that you bring value to your cases, clients, and the legal profession because of your unique strengths, and learn to leverage your areas of highest competency so that law school feels like it is bringing out the best in you.

Conclusion

You have chosen to enter a field in which there are numerous sustainable and satisfying career paths — and if you take what feels like the “default” path, think again. Be confident and strategic in making decisions that are your own, and remember that not everyone in law school shares the same dream. No matter how you define your intrinsic motivators and values, long-term satisfaction is attainable when you take the time to define your mission, build community, and identify and deepen your strengths.

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