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## Practical Lessons Learned While Building a Required Course for Professional Identity Formation

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## ARTICLE

# PRACTICAL LESSONS LEARNED WHILE BUILDING A REQUIRED COURSE FOR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

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In the fall of 2014, Pepperdine Law launched its newest innovation, The Parris Institute for Professional Formation, as an attempt to heighten the importance of the intentional development of a professional identity, an internalized moral core, a written plan for meaningful employment, and an internalized commitment to wellness.

The primary pedagogical platforms for delivering this unique experience included a one-unit Introduction for Professional Formation course in the first year of law school comprised of guest practitioners promoting the principles, mentors exposing students to the context for practice, exercises in reflection and self-awareness including strength and personality inventories, and skills training in professional first impressions, attire, interviewing, and building lasting professional relationships.

In addition, Pepperdine Law commenced the Parris Awards in the Spring of 2015 which acknowledges third-year students who exemplify the highest ideals of the profession: Excellence in Leadership, Service, Professionalism, Character, Courage, Peacemaking, and the Pepperdine Award. This program has exceeded our expectations with over 230 nominations for seven awards in the spring of 2017. Students, faculty, and staff nominate third-year students and the faculty and staff vote for the winners. The ceremony has become one of the best events of the year.

The Parris Institute has now completed its third year. The following lessons learned over the course of these three years were gleaned through a blind survey at the end of the second year plus over 400 one-on-one interviews with first-year students. The process of building the existing program included a brave adventure of trial and error and the patient engagement of our first-year students. As a result, we now have a program

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that our students consistently express brings exceptional value to their legal education.

#### WHAT'S WORKED

##### *1. Relationships*

Personal, one-on-one relationships with each student has proven to be the most effective strategy for professional formation. While massively inefficient, once a student feels known and invested in, they trust, and once they trust, they listen.

##### *2. PRIMACY: A PEDAGOGICAL ADVANTAGE*

Law school, by design, promotes critical thinking. Law school also, inadvertently, can promote a cynical world view. However, there is a brief window of time the week before law school starts and for approximately six weeks into the 1L year where students are uncertain and off balance. They are excited about the ideology of fighting for justice. During this time there is a rare culture of humility and openness that provides a pedagogical advantage. Students seem more inclined to listen to anything that will help them succeed in law school and the profession. We have found this to be true in January as well when grades come out and summer job searches are in full swing. These are the weeks we run our course.

##### *3. CULTURE OF SUPPORT FOR SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING*

First things first. During the above-referenced week before law school classes begin, we have inaugurated Launch Week where we frame all aspects of the week to build a culture of support while emphasizing that each student is responsible for starting and completing the path to meaningful employment. The importance of each student taking ownership of their law school and job placement experience is punctuated from the first day they step on campus. We then proceed to provide them with tools and resources for academic and professional success. This pairs nicely with the message that they are adults who will be treated as such, which seems to be very important to our students.

##### *4. HIGH STRUCTURE*

During the first six weeks of the first semester and the first four weeks of the second semester before the heavy lifting in their doctrinal classes begin, we take our 1Ls through The Road Map materials to the end of creating what we call a Road Map Action Plan. We have found that law students are trying to balance so many different requirements and opportunities in their first year that it helps if we make professional formation a straightforward, high structure process. Any confusion or burden

causes students to tune out, or worse, become frustrated and angry at the disruption professional formation is causing to their core classes.

### 5. *MENTORS*

Our students consistently report that our Preceptor Program is the most valuable experience in their 1L year. Every student is assigned a practicing lawyer or judge. They are required to meet with them a minimum of twice each semester. The goal is to build a lasting professional relationship. Our Preceptors are trained with our objectives of teaching our students to navigate law school with self-directedness and professionalism. Students are also assigned a student mentor and a faculty mentor.

### 6. *MODELS AND THEIR STORIES*

We have found that impressive external professionals are the best messengers of any important professional formation objective we want to meet. Accordingly, our course has evolved into building a team of professionals that are effective in modeling and articulating the various foundational concepts of professional formation through telling their professional story.

## WHAT HASN'T

### 1. *THE SMELL OF INCULCATION*

Our students haven't responded well to the hint, suggestion, or research that they are not fully formed adults who need a deeper understanding of themselves and their purpose and passion.

### 2. *FORMATION DISCONNECTED TO THE PRACTICE OF LAW*

Our students haven't responded well to any formation exercises or presentations that are not directly connected to building success in the practice of law. The Road Map materials framed in the context of enlightened self-interest have helped us realize we need to connect all formation efforts to utility in the practice and profession.

### 3. *FORMATION DURING THE STRESSFUL TIMES OF LAW SCHOOL*

We tried running our class throughout the first semester and have learned that once October hits, students start to feel the stress of midterms, outlines, and heavier workloads and are appreciative of one less requirement when our course ends.

### 4. *MISMANAGEMENT OF FACULTY BUY-IN*

Trying to get all faculty to agree on a single approach to professional formation hasn't worked. Trying to get faculty to add to their load by par-

ticipating in “programmatically” activities hasn’t worked. However, most faculty will agree that professional formation, defined by producing professionally excellent and ethical lawyers, is important, if not critical, to the mission of the law school. And, most, if not all, faculty integrate some form of professional formation in their teaching. Allowing faculty to define what that looks like and continue promoting professional formation in their classes AND FRAMING IT as such begins to include a “whole building” approach to formation and reduces the opposition to the effort.

##### 5. *FRIDAY AFTERNOON*

Scheduling the formation course in the afternoon is risky. Scheduling it on Friday afternoon is life threatening.