



ESSAY

A Connoisseur of Experiences: Academic & Career Planning for JD Students

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As a legal skills professor who works primarily with first-year law students, I often engage in academic and career planning discussions. In this context, I developed a method designed to help students strategically shape their JD careers. This approach encourages students to think intentionally about their goals and identify opportunities for career exploration throughout their time in law school. This method also allows students to discern key characteristics of legal careers that ultimately will bring them the most job satisfaction in the future. The activity can be introduced in a legal skills classroom, or used in one-on-one academic and career advising sessions.

Academic and career advising discussions have long been integral to a law professor's mentoring responsibilities. However, the significance of advising our students has grown even more pronounced since the American Bar Association introduced Standard 303(b) in February 2022.¹ This Standard requires law schools to provide "substantial opportunities to students for . . . the development of a professional identity."² Interpretation 303-5 clarifies that professional identity devel-

¹ American Bar Association's [Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar, Report to the House of Delegates 4](#) (adopted Feb. 14, 2022).

² *Id.*

opment “should involve an intentional exploration of the values, guiding principles, and well-being practices considered foundational to successful legal practice.”³ Interpretation 303-5 also emphasizes that developing a professional identity “requires reflection and growth over time,” and thus should be integrated throughout the entire JD education, “in a variety of courses and co-curricular and professional development activities.”⁴ I hope you and your students find this method useful as a gateway to meaningful conversations, and as a tool for encouraging your students to approach law school as connoisseurs of experiences.

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This method first asks students to brainstorm interests across three strata: 1) legal subjects; 2) lawyering modalities; and 3) practice settings and work environments. Next, students map out activities that allow them to “try on” combinations of these interests in a chart that spans their law school trajectory—from semester and summer internships, to clinics and practicums, to courses and pro bono opportunities. Below, I have included the brainstorming instructions and two

³ “Professional identity focuses on what it means to be a lawyer and the special obligations lawyers have to their clients and society. The development of professional identity should involve an intentional exploration of the values, guiding principles, and well-being practices considered foundational to successful legal practice. Because developing a professional identity requires reflection and growth over time, students should have frequent opportunities for such development during each year of law school and in a variety of courses and co-curricular and professional development activities.” Interpretation 303-5, <https://www.nalp.org/revised-aba-standards-part-1>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Interpretation 303-5 reads in full: “Professional identity focuses on what it means to be a lawyer and the special obligations lawyers have to their clients and society. The development of professional identity should involve an intentional exploration of the values, guiding principles, and well-being practices considered foundational to successful legal practice. Because developing a professional identity requires reflection and growth over time, students should have frequent opportunities for such development during each year of law school and in a variety of courses and co-curricular and professional development activities.”

charts—one for day students, and one for evening or part-time students. I recommend introducing this activity in a face-to-face setting with students, rather sharing the chart and instructions without additional context or opportunity for conversation. This approach can foster rich discussion about the brainstorming process and chart plotting, facilitating a deeper understanding of the student's academic and career development journey.

I. Instructions:

This chart is a tool to help you reflect on the experiences you want to pursue in law school as you prepare for your future legal career. You do not, by any means, need to plot or determine your entire JD career as a 1L. Instead, you can use this chart flexibly—adding ideas periodically, and revising them as your interests evolve. Pro tip: Use a pencil when filling out the chart.

Before working on the chart, brainstorm three lists:

1. Legal subjects—What areas of law interest you? What kind of law might you want to focus on in your legal career?
2. Modalities of lawyering—What kinds of legal work appeal to you? Do you like the idea of direct client services? Impact litigation? Transactional work? Policy research? Academia? Do you want to gain experience interviewing clients, conducting legal research, publishing articles, drafting contracts, analyzing legislation?
3. Organization types/work environments—Where might you want to work? A small firm, big firm, NGO, IGO, think tank, government agency, Capitol Hill?

Consult your lists as you think about what kinds of semester and summer internships, clinics, practicums, courses, and pro bono opportunities you wish to pursue throughout your time in law school. Each of these opportunities is a chance to test different combinations of your interests—your own “legal profession laboratory.” By thinking through your interests and completing this chart, you can approach your time in law school as a connoisseur of experiences. Further, remember that there are no right or wrong ways to fill out the chart. The goal is to explore your interests so you will get a better sense of what fulfills you, what excites you about being a lawyer, and even what types of work or environments might not be the right fit for you. This information is invaluable to your success in the legal profession; it will help you think about how you might approach your legal career options post-JD in a way that is most meaningful to you.

Two charts follow below. The first is for 3-year JD students; the second is for 4-year part-time or evening students.

1L	2L	3L
<u>Fall</u>	<u>Fall</u>	<u>Fall</u>
<u>Spring</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Spring</u>
<u>Summer</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Summer</u>

1E	2E	3E	4E
<u>Fall</u>	<u>Fall</u>	<u>Fall</u>	<u>Fall</u>
<u>Spring</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Spring</u>
<u>Summer</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Summer</u>