Professor Hale: Hello, I’m Melissa Hale, of Loyola University Chicago, and I’m here with three law professors to talk about what you can expect in law school. Or, to put another way, things that were unexpected to us. We have Steven Foster, of Oklahoma City University School of Law, Laura Mott, of City University of New York, and Nicole Lefton, of the Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University

When I started law school, I had very little idea of what to expect, and I felt like I was walking into an entirely different world. How about you guys? When you entered law school your very first semester, what came as the biggest shock? Let’s start with you, Professor Foster.

Professor Foster: For me, recognizing the syllabus is the minimum amount of work to do was new. I quickly realized that putting my notes together after class, creating outlines, and finding a general understanding was as important to my success as the daily reading.  I should have done even more practice questions my first semester, but without attorneys in my family, I had no idea the amount of outside work that was required. Your thoughts, Professor Mott?

Professor Mott: Thank you so much, Professor Foster. The biggest shock for me was how smart everyone else sounded in class. I felt like if I opened my mouth to talk, everyone else would realize that I definitely didn’t deserve to be here. It took me a while to stop having major anxiety when I got called on in class. And it was totally different from participating in undergraduate classes! What do you think, Professor Lefton?

Professor Lefton: The biggest shock was definitely the volume of work and the amount of time I had to devote to it. I had done really well in undergrad, and the work came easily to me. I went straight from undergrad to law school. I wasn’t prepared for the kind of effort I needed to give. After less than stellar grades my first semester, I learned that I needed to change my study habits to be more efficient.

Professor Hale:Thank you. I also know that I was a fairly good student in high school, and during my college years. Studying came fairly naturally to me, but then in law school, everything seemed different, and I had to “learn” to study. Professor Foster and Professor Lefton, that sort of sounds like what you are talking about, so my next question is, for you, what was the biggest difference between your undergraduate years and law school? Professor Lefton?

Professor Lefton: I was an art history major in undergrad, which was so different from law school. Much of my undergrad classroom experience consisted of sitting in the dark, looking at fantastic works of art, and listening to my professor talk about the work. Professor Foster?

Professor Foster: For me, actually doing the reading was different. I was the typical law student that didn’t put as much effort into undergrad as I should have. I went to class, wrote papers the night before, and barely studied for exams. I knew I didn’t put in my best work in undergrad, so I decided before law school started that I would give full effort. I just didn’t realize how much work that was going to be. Professor Mott?

Professor Mott:The biggest difference for me is kind of a combination of both of your experiences. Overall, for sure, was mainly how much time outside of class I had to devote to doing work. Mainly, the outlining process was a huge shock. I couldn’t believe that after we did the readings and went to class and took notes, there was still another step! What had been essentially compiled and handed to us in undergraduate to memorize, we now had to build from the ground up ourselves, and that was after going to class and doing the readings. And then actually apply that doctrine to facts! Related to that, the sheer number of indoor, sedentary hours was another thing that was super different from my experience.

Professor Hale: Thanks for all of this. I absolutely agree and had very similar experiences myself. Now, we are all over a decade removed from law school, so on one hand we are kind of old and wise. But on the other hand, that was a while ago, and we can forget what it’s like to be a new law student. But we do work with students every day – students who didn’t do as well as they had hoped, students who are anxious, and generally, students who need our help. Based on either information from these students, or your own experience, what is one thing you wish you had known before starting law school? Professor Lefton?

Professor Lefton:I wish I had researched a little more about what I was getting myself into. I think I probably still would have made the decision to go to law school, but taking a year or two to learn more about what a career in law might look like for me might have made the law school experience a bit better. Professor Foster?

Professor Foster: My students routinely tell me about how different law school final exams are than anything they experienced in the past. They are surprised by the format and length. They also don’t know the expectations of the professor. Many schools have 1 or 2 exams as the entire grade. Understanding professor expectations early is important.  Looking at practice questions, especially from specific professors, is critical to success. Professor Mott?

Professor Mott: I wish I had known that the LSAT was only the beginning. Just kidding. I think what I really wish I had known was how different class was going to be from class as an undergraduate, and how absolutely tuned in and active you had to be. They say “class is showtime!” but I think I had to experience it to actually understand what that meant. You get crucial pieces of information for the exam during class that you may only hear once.

The other thing I didn’t realize was how critical study groups were going to be to my success as a law student, and how much those relationships were going to matter.  You start developing your professional profile right at the outset of law school.  I tried hard to fly solo towards the beginning, but I found that I needed a team dynamic to pull through those long nights of outlining and doing practice questions. It is very much like a job.

Professor Hale:You all bring up such excellent points, and I agree with all of them. We don’t want to scare you away, we want to help. Our collective hope, I think, is that you learn from what we did NOT know, and go into law school a bit better prepared than we were. I’d like to ask each professor for one takeaway. Professor Mott, I’ll start with you.

Professor Mott:Approach class as a critically important moment in your learning experience, and not as a passive observer.

Professor Foster:My takeaway is, that the syllabus isn’t enough work for success. It is the outside work that’s going to determine how successful you are in law school. Professor Lefton?

Professor Lefton: My takeaway is, do your homework before you go to law school - and set your expectations. Make sure you know what you’re getting into, and make sure that you’re at a time in your life when you can devote the kind of time and focus that you need to be successful in law school.

Professor Hale: I know that we all talked about a lot of things that sound a little bit scary or intimidating, and the good news is, there are CALI lessons that are themed around getting you started on the right foot – lessons on managing the workload, study groups, types of exams – all the things we talked about. We hope that this podcast, and the CALI lessons, will help you feel more confident entering law school than we did. We very much wish you luck!

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