Hi, I’m Nicole Lefton. I’m the Director of Academic Success and Bar Prep at Hofstra University’s Maurice A. Deane School of Law. In this podcast, I am going to discuss ways to spot early warning signs that a student may be struggling to keep up with the workload. I’m also going to give some strategies I’ve used to effectively overcome these struggles.

The first thing to consider is how students can identify when they really are struggling, as opposed to just the usual anxiety that most 1Ls experience. As an Academic Support professional, I’ve found that students who are struggling often don’t realize that they’re struggling.

First, I want to explain why it’s often difficult for students to accurately identify when and how they are struggling. To start with, 1Ls—particularly in the first semester—are generally anxious about their performance and their preparation. Remember that all students struggle to some extent when they start law school. The volume and the difficulty of work is often a big change. So it’s pretty common for 1Ls to feel overwhelmed, and to feel like they are struggling. Plus, I often see stronger students—often the over-achievers—who seek out help because they feel they can do better. While the students who are falling behind often don’t realize that they are in this predicament.

When considering whether you are actually struggling to the level where you might benefit from Academic Support intervention, try looking for markers that consistently show you are falling behind your peers. Here are four ways to identify if you fall into this basket.

First, consider your classroom experience. Do you constantly feel confused or lost during the class discussion? Do you find yourself distracted in class? Confusion over the occasional issue is to be expected, but generally feeling lost or out of sync with the class discussion may indicate that you need to change your approach to your studies (at least in that class). Also, with regard to the classroom experience, are you consistently unable to finish preparing for class, that is, completing the reading before classes? Or even just one class which may be giving you a problem? That can indicate that you’re struggling in the class.

Second, have you gotten some feedback from the professor that shows weak performance, such as feedback on a written assignment or a midterm, or even the results of a multiple-choice or short-answer quiz? Students should pay careful attention to this kind of feedback—it’s often a red flag.

Third, if you are in a study group, do you feel like the others in the study group are farther ahead than you? The point of the group is to help each other and work as a collective unit to improve each other’s understanding, and there will always be individual issues and topics that are tougher for some over others. However, if you’re constantly feeling like you are the weakest link in the group, this may be a sign that you’re struggling.

Finally, what does your gut say? Sometimes we know in our gut if we’re having trouble. I like to ask students how they feel before sitting down to do their work or attending a class. Do you feel a sense of dread and a lack of joy when you sit down to do your work? We all hit a wall periodically, and not every case or subject is as scintillating as another. However, one shouldn’t feel an extreme sense of dread and a lack of joy when sitting down to do work in a particular subject. If doing your homework is always an incredibly negative experience, it might signify a greater problem—that you really are having difficulty grasping the material.

Now I’ll give you some advice to students who are struggling in an overall sense with workload. I find that the advice I give can be broken into two groups: first, advice to students who are struggling with understanding the material, and second, advice to students who can’t seem to keep up with the volume of work. So I’ll break my advice into two parts: comprehension help and time management and study efficacy strategies.

Let’s talk about comprehension help. There are several things that you can do to improve your comprehension in a class.

First would be use of supplemental materials. While I don’t like students to rely on supplemental material instead of their casebooks and class notes, I do find, that if students review supplemental materials in addition to their assigned reading, it can often make the reading and the class discussion clearer. Reviewing the materials before doing the reading can help students zero in on the key issues. And reviewing supplemental material after doing the assigned reading can help students who are struggling with the material zero in on the areas where they’re struggling.

What kind of materials are helpful? Well first, I recommend CALI Lessons, of course, plus there are a variety of 1L products that are out there. Some by the bar providers, others by publishers like CALI, Quimby, E&E—you can go ask your Academic Support professional for advice.

Next way to seek help with comprehension issues is your faculty. Law professors often seem intimidating, but we are here to help you understand the material. If you’re having difficulty with a concept, don’t be afraid to go to the professor or the professor’s TA to discuss. Make sure you have thought through the kinds of questions you want to ask before you approach your professor. Also, try to avoid general questions, such as “I don’t understand what you covered in class today,” or “explain negligence to me.”You can seek out help from your professor or TA during office hours and review sessions, or, if you would rather meet privately with the professor, contact the professor or their assistant and schedule a meeting.

Another way to seek help with regard to comprehension issues is your peers. While law school is often very competitive, working with your peers can be a good way to improve your comprehension. Sometimes all it takes is a discussion with others about a particular concept to better understand that concept. Discussing the hypos covered in class—and changing the facts of those hypos—can be a great way to develop a better understanding of particular issues. So make sure you take advantage of study groups or class discussions with your colleagues. Don’t be embarrassed about asking questions—you may be struggling now and asking for help, but at some point in the future, the shoe may be on the other foot.

Another way to seek help, make sure that you reach out to your Academic Support professionals. Needless to say, your Academic Support professionals can be a great resource. Required or elective classes that are taught by ASPs often teach you how to approach learning and applying law school material. Plus, you can always schedule a meeting with someone on your school’s Academic Support team.Finally, take advantage of workshopsand other ASP-sponsored activities.

Now let’s turn to general strategies regarding time management and study efficacy strategies. These will help you better manage your study time. And the more efficient you are when you study, the more productive you will be. And that usually translates into better grades. So a couple of tips here.

First, plan ahead. Many of us have a tendency to procrastinate. And cramming might have been a fairly successful strategy in undergrad. But it’s generally not a great way to prepare for law school. Make sure you start work early and give yourself enough time to adequately prepare for classes. Start your outlining early. Building the outline throughout the semester not only helps you prepare for the midterm and final, it helps you see how the material covered in each class fit together into the puzzle—that is, the subject.

One great way to make sure you have enough time is to create a weekly calendar, where you literally block off time for each assignment. There’s a great CALI Lesson on this subject, so take a look.

Next, let’s talk again about use of supplemental materials. As I mentioned earlier, you can use supplemental materials to help you if you’re struggling with substantive material, but I’ve also found that you can use these materials to improve your efficiency when studying. Referring to these materials—in addition to the required reading—helps yougrasp the information more quickly.

Finally, let’s consider the study environment. If you feel like you’re spinning your wheels when you’re studying, consider changing the environment where you’re studying. Sometimes, a change of venue can help you focus better on the work, and that leads to a more efficient use of your study time. For example, if you’re studying in your law school reading room or local coffee shop, try finding a quiet place with no distractions. Or, if the quiet place with no distractions is actually lulling you to sleep, consider a location with a bit more energy—just remember to bring headphones or ear plugs.

Well, I’m at the end of my podcast, I hope you found this information helpful. Have a great day.

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