Melissa Hale: Hi, I'm Professor Melissa Hale from the Law School Admissions Council, and I'm joined by Professors Nicole Lefton, Laura Mott, and Steven Foster.

Part of our jobs involve meeting with students after their first semester, and so often they are disappointed in their first semester grades. Most of the time they are students who are used to performing well, and for the first time, are not performing the way they are used to. Therefore, the bad grades, which aren't always even that bad, come as a shock. I am putting bad grades in air quotes because all is relative.

However, whatever your definition is of a bad grade, it is important to set realistic expectations. In this podcast, we are going to talk about why law school is different, what constitutes realistic expectations, and why setting them is important and how to do it.

So, first of all, why law school is different. It's important to understand that this experience in grading will likely be very different from what you've experienced in the past, not just in workload or type of work—which we've talked about in other lessons and podcasts—but in the way that grades are handled and what to expect.

You have to remember that you're now in class and sometimes competition with sort of the top of the top. I'm going to turn this over to Professor Foster so he can elaborate on what that means.

Steven Foster: Thanks, Melissa. The most recent research I have seen says that only two percent of the population attains a doctorate level degree. Which means, if you look around your class, every single one of those students is the best of the best students that you've ever encountered. If you looked at K through twelve, only a certain amount of those students made it into college, and when you look at college, only a certain amount of those students made it into an advanced degree program, an even smaller percentage made it to a doctorate program, an even smaller percentage of that is in law school.

So when you look around at all of your peers, those students jumped over numerous hurdles to be in the same seat that you're in. I can assume that most of them, including you, probably made mostly A’s, and maybe some B’s in the majority of your life. Maybe some of you all have never seen a C on a transcript, or never seen a grade below an A. Many of them were at the very top of their undergrad classes, and when they did it, may not have had to study.

I know, maybe I shouldn't admit this, but, my level of reading might have been a little low in undergrad, and that's true for a lot of people in your classes. They made high grades and probably put in not much effort. And now you're all in the same room, and that's gonna be difficult. And that's gonna be difficult because the way that classes are graded, they compare students on the final exam. And so you need to understand who the people around you are to know what the competition level is.

I'll finish with a good sports analogy: law school is basically just like your top level professional sports. All those little league teams that start at five years old—many of those kids don't make it to twelve. There's massive research that says that the majority of kids stop playing sports at the age of twelve—only a small percentage take it past twelve. Only a certain percentage of those make it into high school. The majority of those don't play sports in college—only a small percentage play college athletics. And an even smaller percentage play professional sports on any level, and an even smaller percentage make it to the top levels of the NFL and the NHL. You need to consider that when thinking about who's in your classes, because law school is the same way. Less than one percent—right?—usually make it into a professional sports organization. Two percent of people get a doctorate level degree. Those numbers are so close because of the level of skill that's required to make it here. That's where you're at.

That's both great news and bad news. The great news is, you have the knowledge, skills, and ability. You have the underlying foundation. You have what it takes to be successful on this level, because you're here. But you also need to understand that everyone else in the room is also someone that has the knowledge, skills and ability.

And I'm going to pass it now to Nicole Lefton who's going to talk about mandatory curves and why understanding that everyone in the room is awesome, is going to impact what grade you make in law school. So now I turn it over to Nicole.

Nicole Lefton: Thank you very much. So, the curve is really an interesting thing that happens in law school. And you may have had a mandatory curve in undergrad, but just to give a little bit of background: the idea of the curve is that, particularly in a school where the curve is mandatory as many law schools are, classes over a certain number of people—it could be twenty-five people, it could be thirty people—require that the professor basically grades along a curve.

And a curve, think about a bell curve. There are two things going into this: there’s the median and the mean. The professors are going to be required to grade with a certain median. Maybe it's a 3.0, maybe it's a 2.8, maybe it's a 2.7, maybe it's a 3.2. And then, in addition, they need to think about the range, the mean. So that for every A that you give to a student, it may require that you give another student a D.

And what happens is it's difficult for professors, certainly, because it forces grading in a certain range. But it's also obviously very difficult for students, because what can often end up happening is, you have a clump of students who may all sort of be in the middle, and the differences between student A and student B's essay or score may be miniscule, at best, but student A may get a higher grade than student B.

That's an unfortunate byproduct of the curve, and it can often make it difficult for students, particularly as first years in law school, where they haven't faced this before, to realize that the differences between the students—all who excel, as Professor Foster said, all who came from a really strong academic background—now the differences in their tests may be very, very minor, but the results in the different grades could obviously have a bigger impact.

So what do you do about this? You just have to know going into it that this is how law school works. And you have to recognize that the difference between a B or a B minus or a B plus, while feeling big to you, does not mean that you haven't mastered the material, does not mean that you don't have a good grasp of the skills needed to succeed in law school, and does not predict how you're going to do in your other classes as you continue.

Melissa Hale: Thank you both, Steven and Nicole. It is important to note that the curve is different at every school, and for that I'm going to turn it over to Professor Laura Mott to discuss different types of curves or law schools and how they might handle it.

Laura Mott: Thank you so much, Professor Hale. Yes, some schools, in fact, do not have a mandatory curve at all. In these kinds of assessment environments, it's technically possible for every student to get an A. However, there are rubrics with points allotted to different pieces and parts of assignments that control the grade that students get, despite the fact that there is no mandatory curve like Professor Lefton talked about.

Other schools have systems like high pass, low pass, things like that that aren't necessarily an A or a B. But all of the information and all of the wonderful wisdom that my colleagues are going to talk about in this podcast still apply to those kinds of schools as well.

Melissa Hale: Thank you, Laura. So now that we've established that all of these people that are used to getting A’s, for the most part, are converging into law school, and not everyone is going to get an A, let's talk a little bit more about what realistic expectations are or what they should be.

So, as we've all discussed in other podcasts and lessons, law school is different from what you've experienced in the past. And I mention this because it's not only about the different grades, but it's a different type of academic program. You are learning something completely new. This means there is absolutely going to be a learning curve, and that is why you set realistic expectations.

I'm going to go back to Professor Foster's sports example. It's a great example about how you are now in the pros. You are now in the very small percentage of people who make it to professional sports. But there is a difference. The difference is, when you use baseball for an example, and you have all the kids that did the T-ball, and then went on to play after twelve and played in their high school team, and then even less students went on to play college baseball and then professional. Now, I appreciate that the skills are slightly different from T-ball and professional ball. I get that. But you're building on almost the exact same skill set as you get better and better and get to the pros.

But law school is a completely new thing. It's learning baseball for the very first time as an adult. So it's a completely new skill, and everyone in law school, yourself included, is a talented athlete that has skills that they can transfer. But, it's still a brand new skill. So please keep that in mind and be kind to yourself. It’s important to work hard, and strive to do your best, but remember that plenty of A students or good students don't get A's in law school, and that's okay.

It's also important to set these realistic expectations for your mental health. Let's start talking about test taking anxiety. According to experts, most of test taking anxiety comes from thinking that grades define us. So any failure on an exam, anything that's less than an A, feels personal. That puts so much pressure on one exam or one course. So it is going to create anxiety which can be completely counterproductive to your processing of information and your studying.

I’m going to turn this over to Laura to talk a little bit more.

Laura Mott: Thanks, Melissa. You're absolutely right. One of the most important things to remember about test taking anxiety, and things that you can think about when that feeling starts to hit you, is that nobody—including any of your classmates that are sitting to your left, to your right, in front of you and back of you, in your study group—has taken any more law school exams than you have. You're all at the very same place.

And combined with the curve that Professor Lefton and I were talking about earlier, the grading system at most law schools is structured to account for each students’, in fact, inexperience, as it relates to law exam test performance.

And so, back to the metaphor of learning baseball as an adult, everybody's learning baseball as an adult. Nobody has ever known baseball or the rules of baseball before, and this is the first time that anybody has been taught those rules.

And so yes, this is a new structure of testing with dense material, but everybody is learning it for the same time. There is a structure, and a method to the process, and if you can embrace the structure and the method and the uncertainty that you may feel as you engage with each piece, it can sometimes help to reduce that anxiety a bit.

I'm going to pass it back to Professor Hale now to talk about how to set these kinds of realistic expectations.

Melissa Hale: Thank you, Laura, and importantly, like Laura said, as you're sitting in your exams, it's important to remember that this is everybody's first baseball game, to continue on with that metaphor. So don't lose sight of that.

So how do we do it? How do we set realistic expectations? I know this sounds cheesy, and it's probably easy for me to say as a professor, but focus on the learning process, not the grades. Often there is this pressure to get good grades, and I appreciate that and I understand that. And I also realize that sometimes jobs and opportunities are based on grades, so it's entirely easier said than done to disregard grades. But keep in mind you are in a professional school, and it really is about learning this new skill, not necessarily the letter on your transcript.

So I'm going to turn it over to Professor Lefton to talk about what advice she can give to students about how to set these realistic expectations.

Nicole Lefton: I think it's really important to keep in mind that your grades don't define you. I mean to some degree obviously they do, and the better that you do, obviously, the better you're going to feel about yourself as a lawyer. But, students who struggle in law school on a particular class or overall, students in the bottom half of the class, don't have a predestined path to a poor career or career options.

And so it's important to think about what sets you a part, what makes you different from the pack, skills that you have, interests that you have, other languages that you speak. Whatever you can do to differentiate yourself is going to help you in your career search and also help you find the right place for you.

Laura Mott: On top of that, I'd also add, a reminder that law school itself is only the beginning of your relationship with legal language, legal learning, and law practice itself. It's the very beginning. When you graduate, you've still only had about three to four years of this, like outward dialogue and inward reflection with the concepts that you're learning as a law student, with the skills that you're learning as a law student.

After you graduate, you can and will still be doing the things you're doing now: reaching out to professors, writing papers, composing blogs about particular legal topics that you're interested in, depending on the job that you get.

Plus, remember all the past accomplishments that got you here. Getting into law school itself, you know, like Professor Foster was mentioning, is already a huge accomplishment, and not a lot of people have been able to jump over those obstacles that you have.

So even if you get a grade you don't like, don't lose sight of what you have already accomplished, and what it means about your potential in the future to accomplish greater and bigger things.

And I'll pass it back over to Professor Foster.

Steven Foster: Thank you, Laura. I want to finish with, not only are you in a room with all of these people who have all done really well. I also want to point out that everyone starts law school from a different place, and is under different circumstances. And I think it's important to understand that everyone has a different starting point, and that that impacts that very first semester. Most of that will, by the end of three years, even itself out, but I want to give you a couple of examples.

All of you know that there are some people in your class that walked in who interned at a law firm during undergrad, and who has some sort of context because they have family that are attorneys, or because, you know, they did something that related to the legal field—mock trial, moot court—in undergrad, and that puts them in a different position than the student who is a first-generation law student who has no experience in the legal profession, who has never heard of a tort.

And I don't want any of you, when you're setting these expectations, to not take into consideration that the starting point, it might be different, and that you really do have to be realistic of where you are and where that can be in the short term, but also what you can do and even that out in the long term.

And I will give you my personal story to give you a little bit of how people start in a different place. I'll be the first to admit I was a first-generation college student, much less a first-generation law student, and someone who had zero people in my family that had any sort of legal education. Which for many people thought, oh wow, you know, maybe that meant that when you walked into law school you had no context—but that wasn't true. I'm someone who also, for four years of high school—yes, I will admit it on something recorded—was in high school speech and debate, who went through four years of college on scholarship for half of it for speech and debate, and during law school also volunteered as a coach, in which, the underlying foundation of what I did for eight years was arguing both sides. And so, when my first-year faculty told me that I needed to argue both sides, I knew exactly what they were talking about, and I understood how to structure an argument and understood what things like IRAC—I didn't know what that meant, the word—but I knew what an argument structure was, and that put me in a different place after my first semester.

I watched many students struggle that first semester that by the end were really good law students, and I see that every single year. So, what I want you all to do is, as you're thinking about realistic expectations, and as you're thinking about, this is the community I'm in with all of these people who have done really well, just because everyone's done well, doesn't mean everyone is on a level playing field the minute they step into law school. You can, through expectations and goal setting, and all of the things that you do over three years, even that out and become a highly successful attorney. But I want you to focus on what you can do and what's realistic for you and what's best for you, because you're not starting at the same place as everybody else, because of different life experiences.

And so, highly encourage you to listen to all of the things that everyone has said today about setting expectations that are based on your mastery, your work ethic, and what you can do, because focusing on that process has the biggest impact.

Thank you, Steven, that's an excellent point, and one that too many people forget about. Added to that, everyone comes into law school with different obligations: family, financial. Some people are moving to completely new cities and don't know anyone. So, everyone is in the same boat in terms of taking the exam for the first time, but everyone sort of comes with different skill sets and different positioning, and I think that's important to remember, and important to remember not to let that discourage you.

So thank you to Professor Foster, to Professor Mott, and to Professor Lefton. I appreciate them sharing their wisdom. Thank you for joining us on this podcast, and I just really want to stress that we don't want you to set the expectation that you will not do well. This is not meant to be a negative thing. We just want you to be realistic that this is a new skill.

And also, I cannot stress this enough, grades do not define you. In a few years they might not even matter. I realize they can be important now, and I don't want to downplay that, but I want you to think of the bigger picture, I want you to think about the advice that you heard here, and I want you to be kind to yourself.

Lawdibles are produced and distributed by CALI, The Center for Computer-Assisted Legal Instruction. Find more Lawdibles at www.cali.org/lawdibles. Send your questions and feedback to lawdibles@cali.org. The Lawdibles theme music is “Ask Me No Question” by [Learning Music](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Learning_Music/). Lawdibles are for educational purposes only. Please seek an attorney if you need legal advice.

CREDIT: Ask Me No Question by Learning Music is licensed under an [Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License.](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/)