**Competitiveness**

Did you watch “The Paper Chase”? Well, probably not because it's old, but maybe “Legally Blonde” or “How to Get Away with Murder”? Did you think their environment was competitive?  Did you think the way they interacted and undercut each other was a little bit underhanded? Is that the view you had walking into law school?

My name is Stephen Foster, and I'm the Director of Academic Achievement at OCU School of Law, and my hope is to help you navigate a competitive environment to still thrive in law school.

First, I will say that those movies are fictitious. But law school is a competitive environment. I'm not going to lie and tell you that competition doesn't exist, or that there won't be some people that are competitive. Unfortunately, law school brings out the worst in many of us. The people that are competitive become even more competitive. Yeah, that also means the obnoxious people might be more obnoxious. But that's a different podcast. Many inherently competitive people are in law school, and they make the entire environment even worse. You may have heard stories from older attorneys who will say that when a library assignment was due, someone would rip the page out of the book in the library. That's probably a little much, and not what you'll see in most law schools, especially since there aren't paper books to do your library assignments.

The issue is when and why is the law school environment competitive. The first is class ranks. At the end of the semester, and at the end of the year, they rank every person in the class. And unfortunately, when we're talking about class ranks, that's the basis for some law firms when they make job offers or when they're going to interview. So many students are hypersensitive to what their class rank is going to be.

The second reason competitiveness is high in law school is the grading. Law school grading is not the same as undergrad. Law school grading includes comparative grading and mandatory curves. Comparative grading means there isn't a standard for you to meet to get ninety percent. Most people will never get ninety percent of the points on a law school exam.

Comparative grading is each student scores a number of points. Professors then create a bell curve based on the number of points for each person in the class. Now it's not a perfect bell curve each time. But mandatory curves in law school mean that not everybody can get an A or even a B. There will be a large section of the population, depending on what school you're at,  that are going to get just a middle of the road B minus or C plus grade. Now I will acknowledge that every law school has a different mandatory curve, and so your school might have a higher or lower curve, but everything will be based on a curve. Mandatory curves make it where everybody is competing with each other to try to maximize their opportunities to be successful on final exams, and in getting jobs, and that's understandable. That's probably not the best way to educate individuals but it is the way law schools operate.

I do want to dispel one myth before my tips. You may hear or read that first semester or first year's grades are the only thing that's going to matter for jobs. I want to tell you that is one hundred percent not true.

Will first semester or first year's grades determine some of the employment opportunities? Yes, because there are some employers that will do interviews right after first or second semester, and even in the third semester. But that's not where the majority of people get their final jobs. The percentage of students who get a job based on their first semester grades and that's the job they take when they graduate is a really low percentage. In any given year, the national average is anywhere between 80 and 90 percent of graduates have a job within nine months of graduation. That means you don't have to be at the very top of the class after the first semester. That means you can still reach your dream of practicing law, even if that first year isn't what you thought it was going to be.

I can tell you personally that the first two jobs I received during law school - my 1L summer and my 2L summer - were not based on grades. They were based on the relationships I built with other students in my class. And were able to work at firms that they already worked at. The key for getting jobs is going to be setting yourself apart so that employers want to hire you. And, if 90% of people are getting jobs then you’re going to be able to set yourself apart in certain niches that are going to end up fulfilling your dream of practicing law.

Knowing the environment will be competitive, I do have a few tips.

Here are four things that I think you should do. First, I think you should define success as your personal best. I know this sounds like something your mom would say. But moms are generally right. You should listen to that piece of advice. Define success as your personal best, because you can always find someone better. That’s true in any profession. Sports has many great examples. In my lifetime, the best golfer on the planet is Tiger Woods. And he hasn’t won the most Majors ever. Ok, let’s pick Jack Nicklaus since he has won the most Majors, but he hasn’t won the most tournaments ever. He only won a certain number of tournaments. And only one - certain ones - the Majors more than anyone else. That example shows you you can always find someone better or with more of what you want.

Another golf example is Phil Mickelson. He is a Hall of Fame golfer who has won more tournaments than the vast majority of people ever. And was never ranked number one and most people would say was never better than Tiger Woods. Was he a bad golfer? Absolutely not. You can always find someone that’s better. Don’t let that impact you and your enjoyment of law school.

If you are comparing yourself to someone else, you will always lose that competition. Unfortunately, that's just going to leave you with a negative law school experience. The other example that I like to use is social media, and I will admit that I am taking this discussion from my pastor, because it is something he talks about all the time. When we compare to other people, we compare our every day to other people’s highlight reel.

On social media, I see everyone else's vacation and wonder why I'm not going on vacation. It creates negative or heavy feelings. The same is true in law school. You may hear about someone else's grades or hear about the amount of work they're doing, which could create negative feelings about what you are doing. Everyone’s situation is different though. I want you to focus on what will work best for you and not how well someone else is doing.

Also, I don’t want to give away too many secrets, but many people lie. There's a whole bunch of liars in your law school, but just from a psychological confidence perspective. Many people will only tell you about the one A they received or the one set of questions they just nailed. They won’t tell you about the C minuses or the sets of questions they bombed. They talk about how hard they worked last week but fail to mention they exhausted them self so much they took off the first two days of this week. What you hear is only their highlight reel.

Don’t compare your every day to their highlights. Because you will always lose that comparison.

I want you to quit that comparison and think about what is best for you. I tell every student in my Bar Prep class that what I care about at the end of the bar exam is that they can walk out and say they did everything within reason that they could do. Because you know every situation is different. Whether it is working, being a parent, other obligations, everyone has a different situation. Define success as your personal best within your situation.

My second tip is to set mastery goals not result based goals. Mastery goals focus on tasks and the process and not the end result. For law school, those could be, by the end of the week, I will complete one outline, work two practice essay questions, or memorize a number of pages on an outline. Set tasks to be completed each day and each week. The mastery goal setting creates a sense of accomplishment that is independent of what anyone else does. The focus on yourself can decrease your perception of the competitive environment.

Mastery goals also lead to results more often than result based goals. Result goals are things like I'm going to lose ten pounds, I'm going to get an A, or I'm going to score a certain level on a test. Result-based goals are like New Year's resolutions, and if you've seen any of the research, large portions of the population quit New Year's resolutions by Valentine's Day. Most people fail because they are focused on the result and not the process. Focus on the process to both improve and remove yourself from the competitive environment.

The third tip is to focus on what you can control. If law school grading is comparative, then you are going to be compared to other students. But, you have no control over how they prepare or write an exam. I have another silly sports analogy, but again, golf is similar to law school. I talk to my young son about this all the time. When you play golf, you just have to go play the course. Whatever you score is the score you get. If you are in a tournament and your score is 4 over par, you could be in 35th place, but a different group of players and that same score could be 1st place. You can't control the other people, so you can’t control what place you get. I always joke with him that he can’t play defense. He isn’t allowed to tackle someone when they are about to swing. On a law school exam, you can’t run around and steal other peoples’ tests or yell at them while they are writing their answers. You can’t play defense in law school either. All you can do is put in your time and effort and see what that does to be prepared for the final exam.

If you worry about things that you can't control, you'll just constantly worry which then leads to a decrease in the amount of work that you do, and unfortunately usually leads to less learning or performance.

What can you control? It's the mastery goals from Tip 2. Focus on what you can do this week to prepare and complete those tasks. Focusing on you can help muffle the competitive environment.

My last tip will follow a similar theme and is to ignore other people. Have you watched a football movie where one of the defensive players is yelling at the quarterback the entire time trying to throw him off his game? Treat your law school classmates as that linebacker. Whether intentional or not, their words are there to throw you off your game.

Every summer I have at least one bar student in my office in tears. They tell me all their friends are scoring higher on the multiple choice sections than they are. Generally, it isn’t true. Their friends scored higher on one set of multiple choice questions. They didn’t talk about the other four sets of questions they did poorly on. People in general do the same thing. We celebrate our accomplishments and shout from the mountains, but we whisper the bad results. You should ignore what other people are doing. When you did well, they may not have. That is a hard perspective to have, but changing our perspective to ignore others’ statements is easier said than done. However, it is critical to not falling into the competitive game.

I will provide one caveat, I don’t want you to ignore people altogether. You should study with others and connect with classmates that will be lifelong colleagues. I only want you to ignore when they are highlighting their performance. You can tell them good job, but don’t think about how that compares to your performance. Tell them great job and then forget about it. For law school, you need a short memory on performance. Also remember, someone else’s success doesn’t prevent you from being successful. You and your friends can succeed.

Remember, law school is hard. And you’re moving up a level in accomplishments. It is hard for everyone. It was hard for your law professors, and it will be hard for all your classmates. No one stands up and celebrates when they are wrong, but being wrong is critical to growing as a student. Mistakes lead to learning. Don’t let the competitive environment prevent you from learning. If you define success as your personal best, set mastery goals, focus on what you can control, and ignore other students’ performance then you will enjoy law school experience much more. Good luck in law school.

And I hope you can remove yourself from this environment and enjoy as much of it as possible.

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