



Feature

Professionalism and Responsibility

By Jay Conison, Dean of Valparaiso Law School

Last week, the Illinois Supreme Court announced two initiatives aimed at strengthening the quality and character of the legal profession in Illinois and increasing the public's confidence in Illinois lawyers. One initiative requires a minimum amount of continuing legal education of all attorneys licensed in the state, including specific requirements in the areas of ethics, professionalism, and diversity. A second creates a Commission on Professionalism, the express goal of which is "to promote among the lawyers and judges of Illinois principles of integrity, professionalism, and civility; to foster commitment to the elimination of bias and divisiveness within the legal and judicial systems; and to ensure that those systems provide equitable, effective, and efficient resolution of problems and disputes for the people of Illinois."



Through these developments, Illinois joins the many other state courts, bar associations, and legal organizations determined to raise the level of professionalism among lawyers. This determination is not new. Long ago, the campaign to move legal education

away from apprenticeships and

into law schools was aimed in part at just this end. The motivations for the more recent campaigns and initiatives are various. For the Illinois Supreme Court, the primary motivation seems to be a perception that the "Rambo-style, win-at-all-cost attitude by attorneys" has been quite harmful to the profession and everyone involved in it. Some of the efforts by other organizations have been motivated by concern that financial considerations are too often given priority over service to clients and the justice system.

Law schools, too, have been part of this effort and are intensifying their focus on professionalism. Last year, for example, I attended a workshop on approaches to teaching professionalism in law schools. An important goal here is a desire to ensure that graduates have a strong appreciation of law as a form of service to clients and to the public, and not just something one does to earn a living. To practice law is a privilege, and it should be open only to those persons having not only a base of knowledge and skills, but also demonstrably good character and a sense of responsibility to the constituencies they serve. Law schools cannot create good character (although they can encourage it). But they can impart a sense of responsibility to clients and other constituencies as they impart fundamental knowledge and skills.

Thus, the law faculty at Valparaiso has been developing programs and practices to improve instruction in professionalism. For example, we added to the new-student orientation a program on professionalism that serves as an

introduction to the history of lawyering and professionalism and an introduction to the expectations of clients, judges, and fellow attorneys. Currently, the faculty is working on enhancements to their teaching that will enable them to do a better job of instilling the values of professionalism across the curriculum.

Thus far, I have been discussing professionalism in terms of responsibility to clients, judges, fellow attorneys, and the public. But professionalism has several aspects; another fundamental one consists of responsibility to oneself. This aspect is harder to teach and thus is often neglected because it is intimately interconnected with character. Yet it is no less central to what we understand by professionalism. It is also central to one's opportunities for success.

In the context of law school, this aspect of professionalism can be approximated by the maxim "Take your professional education seriously." You are investing three years of your life; borrowing to fund your future; and undergoing the daily rigors of reading assignments, classes, and exams. To fail to take your professional education seriously is to waste this investment. It is also to give up opportunities. You are taking actions today for the benefit of yourself tomorrow, and you owe it to yourself to maximize the probability you will be successful tomorrow and maximize your available options. You have only one chance at law school, and when you have only one chance, you must play to win. It is easy to list the things you should and should not do as part of your responsibility to yourself. You should take classes seriously. Prepare for them, and don't use them as a time to catch up on email. Take the job-search process seriously from day one. Set career goals, and work with the Career Planning Office to pursue them effectively. Don't wait until your third year to start the search. Take the bar examination seriously. Dedicate yourself fully to preparing for it so that you maximize your chance to pass the first time (or else don't sign up to take it until you are ready to make this commitment). Take your reputation and public behavior seriously.



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But as important as these prescriptions are, responsibility to self is not just a matter of dos and don'ts. At bottom, it is a matter of taking charge of the one aspect of your professional development that law schools can't teach—the character and

attitude that make for a full professional. We can help, but you alone are the master of your character.

This story originally ran in the Valparaiso Law School student publication, the *Forum*.

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