The Advantages of Joining Law Review, Part I: The Practicing Attorney’s Perspective

By Elizabeth Smith

At one time or another, every law student wonders whether writing for a major student publication or law review will open unique career opportunities in the future. Many students also question whether the time devoted to law review tasks might negatively affect their studies. LawCrossing sought out three practicing attorneys’ opinions on whether to pursue this honorable yet time-consuming goal.

Parker Folse, a law partner in the Seattle office of Susman Godfrey, saw his law review membership and strong grades propel him into the position every law student dreams of: clerking for a U. S. Supreme Court Justice. After graduating from the University of Texas Law School, Mr. Folse clerked for Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist.

Mr. Folse shed light on some of the less tangible but enduring ways that law review activities can benefit both students and practicing attorneys:

“Membership in the law review definitely enhanced my experience in law school. I learned to become a more disciplined writer, to think critically about issues, and to take care in deciding what to say and how to say it clearly and succinctly. I also learned how to edit the written work of other people in a way that improved what they had done without changing style or substance. These are skills I continue to use to this day in my practice. Through membership on the law review, I also came in contact with fellow students I probably would not have met otherwise and made lifelong friends.”

Mr. Folse went on to note that in addition to the skills he developed while on law review, certain career opportunities were available in part because of that experience:

“[My] law review experience opened doors for me that may well have remained closed [otherwise]. It’s absolutely clear, for example, that most federal judges look for law review experience in deciding whether to offer judicial clerkships. Many law firms, including my own, consider law review experience to be a significant plus—if not an essential factor—in deciding whether to make job offers. The ability to think and write clearly do not alone guarantee success in the law practice, but judges and law firms know that without those abilities, success is difficult to achieve, and law review experience teaches those abilities.”

Paul Cane served as editor in chief of the California Law Review at Boalt Hall School of Law at the University of California at Berkeley before clerking for U. S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell. Mr. Cane currently practices as a partner in Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker’s San Francisco office. He recently shared the following insights into how his law review experience enriched his student life and his work as a practicing attorney.

“Playing a leadership role gives you contact and credibility with faculty members whom you’d otherwise not meet. Unquestionably, it makes you a better lawyer when you’re done. A major editing role on serious legal scholarship causes you to question ideas, question argument structure, and question the need for every word within every sentence on every page. The rigorous analytical skills acquired and the writing training provided are phenomenal.”

Mr. Cane, the hiring partner in his office, said that he “give[s] significant plus points to candidates who have leadership responsibilities on significant law reviews. They simply are better, more careful lawyers from day one.”

Mr. Cane also cautioned students to carefully consider which law reviews they apply to and to realize that their level of dedication and leadership will directly affect the quality of their law review experience. He said he distinguishes:

“...between mere ‘joiners’—people who want journal experience on their resumes—and those who really threw themselves at the journal experience and derived the maximum benefit from it. The former do not derive nearly
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the benefit that the latter do. I also distinguish between journals. There has been an explosion in the number of journals in the past 25 years. Some are serious (and provide the kind of discipline I mentioned); others are not. This is not to say that one must work on a school’s ‘official’ law review to derive substantial benefit from the experience; there are some excellent other journals at many schools. But a student should inquire carefully before signing on, in order to ascertain whether the experience at a particular journal will be worth the time.”

Mark Pulliam, a partner in the San Diego office of Latham and Watkins, echoed many of the sentiments put forth by Mr. Folse and Mr. Cane and volunteered some of his own unique perspectives. Mr. Pulliam served on the law review at the University of Texas Law School. He said that he’s always been surprised at how many students graduate from both college and law school with poor writing skills. However, those who work on a law review tend to become “more effective writers” and “more successful attorneys.” Mr. Pulliam further stated that when you’re working on a law review:

“You’re refining your craft. When you spend a lot of time correcting other people’s writing, you can’t help but improve your own grammar skills and cite form. You often develop much better legal writing skills than your classmates. These skills will help you later as an attorney—whether you’re drafting pleadings, transactional documents, or letters to other counsel.”

Mr. Pulliam also said that law students who serve on law review impress potential legal employers who are always looking for “hard-working, tenacious, goal-oriented associates.” He said that firms tend to think that those who’ve served on law review will be “similarly committed as lawyers.”

Based on the views shared above, it seems clear that acquiring a leadership position on a significant law review publication can greatly enhance students’ skills and improve their chances of finding competitive and meaningful work upon graduation.

[Part Two of this story will run next week and will examine the perspective of other legal professionals, including current law students.]