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Educational Interventions to Cultivate Professional Identity in Law Students: 17th Annual Georgia Symposium on Professionalism and Ethics

The goal of the symposium was to explore effective ways to intervene in a student's legal education, through courses or otherwise, to try to cultivate the right kind of professional identity.

BY PROF. PATRICK E. LONGAN

In 1999, Hon. Hugh Lawson, now a Senior U.S. District judge for the Middle District of Georgia, oversaw the settlement of a matter that involved allegations of litigation misconduct. As part of the settlement, four of Georgia's law schools each received an endowment to fund annual symposia programs. The symposium series began in 2001 and rotates among Mercer University, Georgia State University, the University of Georgia and Emory University.

Mercer University School of Law recently hosted the 17th Annual Georgia Symposium on Professionalism and Ethics. The theme of the symposium was "Educational Interventions to Cultivate Professional Identity in Law Students." That title deserves some explanation. In its 1996 report, "Teaching and Learning Professionalism,"¹ the Professionalism Committee of the American Bar Association Section on Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar recommended that law schools devote more attention in the curriculum to lawyer professionalism. Eight

years later, Mercer Law School responded to that call and added a first-year required professionalism course, The Legal Profession. We undertook through that course to "teach professionalism."

We have gradually come to the conclusion that "teaching professionalism" is only a small part of the larger mission. That larger mission gave us the theme of the symposium: the cultivation of professional identity in our students. The ultimate goal is for our students to become lawyers who will faithfully fulfill the purposes of the profession. Knowing the tenets of "professionalism" is necessary for that purpose but not sufficient. David Brooks captured the broader picture when he wrote, "Our institutions depend on people who have enough engraved character traits to fulfill their assigned duties."² An "engraved character trait" is a part of a person's identity, and the institutions of the law depend upon lawyers having the kind of professional identity that will dispose them to fulfill their duties and thereby preserve the institutions

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of the law. A law school cannot “teach” professional identity. The development of professional identity requires more than the transmission of knowledge. But law school inevitably “cultivates” professional identity, for better or worse, by everything that happens during a student’s legal education. The goal of the symposium was to explore effective ways to intervene in a student’s legal education, through courses or otherwise, to try to cultivate the right kind of professional identity.

We sought and received the help of other disciplines. Prof. Clark Cunningham from Georgia State University College of Law spoke at the symposium and collaborated with two distinguished psychologists, Muriel Bebeau, University of Minnesota, and Steven Thoma, University of Alabama, on an article regarding the role of social science research in formulating and assessing educational interventions related to professional identity formation.³ Prof. Larry Krieger from Florida State University School of Law reported on the results of his work with Professor of Psychology Kennon Sheldon on the connections between professional identity and lawyer satisfaction. Prof. Elizabeth Vozzola, University of St. Joseph, West Hartford, Conn., brought to us her insights from the field of moral psychology.

We needed guidance from other professions as well. Lt. Col. Benjamin Grimes, deputy director, Professional Responsi-

bility Advisory Office at the U.S. Department of Justice, started the symposium by describing his experience with professional identity formation at West Point. We also heard from Dr. Richard Cruess and Dr. Sylvia Cruess, Center for Medical Education, McGill University, leading experts on the cultivation of professional identity in medical school. Dr. Larry Golemon, executive director, Washington Theological Consortium, Washington, D.C., described his experience with identity formation in clergy education.

Law professors (in addition to Cunningham) also contributed to the success of the symposium. Professors Tim Floyd from Mercer and Kendall Kerew from Georgia State provided a detailed look at a particular type of “educational intervention,” the academic component of a field placement program. Prof. Emeritus Jack Sammons from Mercer spoke at the symposium and brought his deep philosophical perspective to the question of professional identity and “the art of self.” Prof. Mark Jones from Mercer helped to plan the symposium and contributed his article on the development of virtue and practical wisdom as components of professional identity. Prof. Neil Hamilton, St. Thomas University School of Law, Minneapolis, Minn., shared his work on assessment of professional identity formation learning outcomes, particularly with respect to the need for proactive professional development.

I believe that there is no better long-term way of promoting ethics and professionalism among lawyers than to graduate students who have internalized, personal commitments to the virtues necessary for the fulfillment of the purposes of the legal profession. The 17th annual Georgia Symposium on Professionalism and Ethics was an important step in improving how law schools can go about this crucial task. ●



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This article is adapted from Patrick Emery Longan, Educational Interventions to Cultivate Professional Identity in Law Students: Introduction, 68 Mercer Law Review 579 (2017).

Endnotes

1. Teaching and Learning Professionalism, Report of the Professionalism Committee, American Bar Association Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar (1996).
2. David Brooks, *When the World is Led by a Child*, New York Times, May 16, 2017.
3. The articles from the symposium have been published in volume 68 of the *Mercer Law Review*.