

AALS 2024 Annual Meeting  
Section on the Empirical Study of Legal Education & the Legal Profession

Professional Identity Formation in Transitions  
Externship Structure and Pedagogy as a Tool for Law Schools

Presented by Megan Bess, UIC Law

### Background

Transitions are key to professional identity formation for professional students. Research from other disciplines and limited research on law students shows that significant transitions occur while performing real-world work. Thus, schools have an opportunity and, arguably, a responsibility under ABA Standard 303, to aid in professional identity formation during these key transitions. Legal education's experiential learning pedagogy provides a framework to bring meaning to this real-world work.

### Study of Student Transitions

Neil Hamilton studied how students assess transitions during their first year and the summer following. He asked students to rate the impact of different experiences on transitioning them to thinking and acting like a lawyer. The most impactful experience was summer employment (paid or unpaid)—89% of respondents rated this as having a great, substantial, or moderate impact.<sup>1</sup>

### Externship Structure and Pedagogy

Law schools can leverage experiential learning pedagogy and structure to provide professional identity formation support to all students as they perform legal work in the real world. For example, schools seeking to support students during these important transitions can scale existing externship programs to aid students in reflection on their experiences and professional identity formation. Externships are structured to support students as they engage in work outside the law school and the traditional law school curriculum. Externship programs often support a high volume of students and can be adapted to the needs of each law school.

Many common elements of externship pedagogy support professional identity formation. Law school faculty and/or staff take an active role in guiding students through their externship experience and helping them make meaning of their real-world work. Tools for this include, but are not limited to:

- Training/orientation for the real-world experience
- Assessing strengths and weaknesses
- Goal setting
- Reflection
- Feedback
- Journaling
- Meetings with instructors and/or supervisors
- Facilitated rounds conversations (discussions centered on solving problems faced in the externship setting)

Schools can adapt externship pedagogy as appropriate to create programming to support students performing real-world work in any setting. It is important to recognize the roles that other departments in a law school can play in this work. Externship programs often run in partnership and/or cooperation with other departments.

---

<sup>1</sup> Neil Hamilton, *The Major Transitions in Professional formation and Development from Being a Student to Being a Lawyer Present Opportunities to Benefit the Students and the Law School*, 73 BAYLOR L. REV. 139, 142 (2021).