





What do you do when a partner gives you a vague assignment?

How do you manage the emotions of an angry client?

How do you build a successful lawyer-client relationship?

Practice Ready from Day One

by Melissa Apter

THESE SKILLS WON'T BE FOUND IN A TRADITIONAL LAW SCHOOL textbook, and yet are essential for new lawyers to master in order to be considered "practice ready" as a first-year attorney. GW Law, through innovative curricula and programming, makes professional development of these skills a priority from day one, resulting in graduates landing dream jobs in competitive fields.

illustration by Neil Webb



Professor Erika Pont, interim associate director of the Fundamentals of Lawyering Program, helps 1Ls master real-world professional skills.

“A GW Law education prepares our students not only to be practice ready but to be uniquely practice ready as compared to any other law graduate in the country,” says GW Law Dean Dayna Bowen Matthew. “Their education is from a faculty that inspires them—that teaches them to live and practice as lawyers of impact and as lawyers of influence.”

Professional development training begins on week one of law school. First-year students are assigned to one of six Inns of Court, each named for a former Supreme Court justice. The Inns hold weekly learning sessions throughout the fall on topics such as professional identity, understanding legal practice areas and settings, and finding career satisfaction. Students have access to an advisory team of faculty, administrators, staff, and upper-class students who help them succeed in law school and assist them in developing their career goals through one-on-one and group meetings.

Students who complete the program requirements by the end of their 1L year are awarded the Dean’s Recognition for Professional Development.

Self-direction is a highly sought-after skill, explains Professor Todd Peterson, director of the award-winning Inns of Court program. “It’s one of the top two or three skills valued by those hiring young lawyers. If you look at the evaluation rubrics of big law firms and government agencies, they ask: ‘Does the lawyer take responsibility for his or her professional development as a lawyer?’”

In fact, there are 26 factors in predicting lawyer effectiveness as outlined by Marjorie M. Shultz and Sheldon Zedeck in a much-cited 2011 article in the *Journal of the American Bar Foundation*. These factors, ranging from networking and relationship development within the legal profession to stress management and seeing the world through the eyes of others, are generally not found in textbooks.

“It’s not a surprise to people who practice law that you need way more skills than you learn in the classroom,” Professor Peterson says.

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“Part of the impetus of the Inns program was to introduce students to those skills early and set them on a path that will help them develop those skills and be able to speak to and demonstrate those skills to potential employers.”

The Fundamentals of Lawyering Program (FP), an innovative, yearlong course for 1Ls which works hand-in-hand with Inns, was launched in the fall of 2019. The centerpiece of the most significant reform of GW Law’s first-year curriculum in a generation, the six-credit course was designed to reflect the changing practice of law and gives graduates the essential lawyering skills employers value most.

Greater emphasis has been placed on client relationship building and simulated client interactions, in addition to the strong legal research and writing skills, appellate writing, and oral advocacy first-year students are expected to master, explains Interim Director of the FL program and Professor of Legal Research and Writing Iselin Gambert.

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Professor Iselin Gambert, interim director of the Fundamentals of Lawyering Program, teaches 1Ls how to think through the lens of client-centered problem solving.

orientation,” says Interim Associate Director of the FL Program Erika Pont.

The FL program includes an innovative and memorable simulation exercise to drive this client-oriented point home. Students are given an identity in a fictitious law firm. The purpose of the exercise is to get students to think about what it means to be an associate who has supervisors and clients. In the same vein, rather than giving students a one-page prompt describing a fictitious client, a sophisticated client ecosystem is built out. The faux clients have websites, they have strife within their companies, they may be distraught about their case or upset at how the case is being handled—all things that happen in the real world and none of which a textbook can fully prepare a student to tackle.

It’s now a staple of the curriculum for upper-level students or guest practitioners to act out the part of the client with all the emotions and worries that a real client may present. Second-year GW Law student Courtland “Cody” Ingraham recalls a particularly memorable part of the exercise. He was asked to interview with a costumed former colleague of Professor Pont. “Our case team was not expecting the client to be angry. He came in with questions about billing, and our ‘supervisor’ threw us under the bus,” recalls Mr. Ingraham. “It taught us how to think on our feet because, realistically, you might get an angry client or a supervisor who gives haphazard assignments or whose attention is pulled in different directions.”

“What we’re trying to do is acculturate law students to this client-centered problem-solving perspective from day one so that it becomes second nature. What we want is for students to go into their first summer jobs after their 1L year and already be thinking through that lens of client-centered problem solving,” says Professor Gambert. “We’re hoping that gives GW Law students a distinct advantage.”

That certainly was true for third-year student Cameron Klein, who says a major takeaway from FL was, “Lawyering and law in general is not just an intellectual exercise; it’s a client-centered industry.” Learning objective and persuasive forms of legal writing, and when to use each, in the first year helped him at his various internships. This past summer, he interned with Manly, Steward & Finaldi and he’s currently interning with District Judge Amy Berman Jackson of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

Similarly, third-year law student Liran Koropitser relied on her FL training as a summer associate with the D.C. Office of the Attorney General, Civil Litigation Division. Her section chief complimented her strong writing skills and ability to grasp complex legal issues. When faced with a complex issue, Ms. Koropitser says she thought to herself, “What did I learn in FL? Go to the facts. Get all the juicy details from the myriad documents. Stay calm, that’s where you start.”

FL’s holistic approach to serving clients and focus on law students’ professional identity formation puts GW Law ahead

of the curve. This past spring, the Council of the American Bar Association Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar announced it is developing new requirements for law schools when it comes to professional identity formation (Standard 303). “I’m really proud that GW is several years ahead of the game. We’re at the forefront of something that is likely going to be required by our accrediting body because it’s so important to legal education,” says Professor Pont.

The GW Law Difference: From Key Externships to Dream Jobs

WITH OVER 500 PARTICIPANTS EACH YEAR, GW LAW boasts one of the largest externship programs in the country—and certainly the largest in the D.C. area—through its Field Placement Program. Overseeing the program, which runs during the fall, spring and summer semesters and is available to all students who have completed their first year, is Assistant Dean for Field Placement Keri A. McCoy. Her team works closely with the law school’s Center for Professional Development and Career Strategy to assist students in securing legal externships with judicial, government, and nonprofit organizations that meet the American Bar Association standards for receiving academic credit. Many of these are with the large network of prestigious GW Law alumni.

The seemingly infinite list of placements where GW Law students have externed include the Department of Justice, the American Civil Liberties Union, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the U.S. House of Representatives, to name a few. “Thanksgiving is a lot of fun when you go home and tell your family that you’re externing with a judge, the White House, or the EPA,” says Assistant Dean McCoy.



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Students completing externships enroll in corequisite courses that are specifically designed to complement their individual externship experiences. Student externs benefit from the guidance and mentorship of corequisite faculty and placement supervisors, all of whom are judges or practicing attorneys whose areas of expertise align with the students’ work. Regular check-ins with externship supervisors and a debriefing at the midpoint and end of each externship ensures that GW Law students get to complete substantive work at each placement.

“Our faculty is not only an awesome group of scholars, but they also move comfortably to roles in and out of government, in and out of the private sector, in and out of nonprofit leadership, in and out of international positions of influence. Alumni adjunct instructors demonstrate excellence in practice and in service to the profession. Our resident and alumni faculty know not just how to teach students to be practice ready, but are practice ready themselves and thus show students how to have a real impact in the real world,” adds Dean Matthew.

“At GW, our students can absolutely get those jobs that brought them here, the dream jobs with the employers they read about and see in the news,” says Assistant Dean McCoy. “The externship experience is one more arrow to have in your quiver, and if [students] take advantage, then they will absolutely get to where they want to be in their careers.”

D.C., she says, is an unparalleled location to attend law school and “add critical bullet points to your resumé that increase your marketability” so that you can secure your dream job. “Other



Professor and GWNY Director Lawrence Cunningham (back row, third from right) enjoying an evening gala with GWNY students and faculty at the Museum of American Finance.



GW in New York participants enjoying a front row seat to business law at the New York office of Jones Day.

law schools have summer in D.C. programs to get the experiences that GW Law students get year-round,” says Assistant Dean McCoy.

But for those students who want to explore business law, there’s no better program than GW in New York (GWNY). The intensive spring semester program, founded by Professor and GWNY Director Lawrence Cunningham in 2017, brings a small cohort of second- and third-year law students to live, work, and learn in the Big Apple. Students spend approximately 20 hours a week at their Field Placement Program-vetted externships while completing five classes at two credits apiece.

“The fact that the program combines an externship in the day and classes at night—it’s rigorous, and the assignments are practical and true to life,” says Omid Rahnama, JD ’18. Now an associate at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison LLP, he recalls drafting commercial agreements and preparing for and acting out an asset sale in bankruptcy court for his GWNY externship with the SEC, Division of Enforcement, Trial Unit.

“You have to be really efficient and make sure that you’re firing on all cylinders, which prepared me for life as an associate at a big law firm,” he says.

Classes are taught by prominent GW Law alumni at the New York firms where they practice, the sorts of firms where the names on the building and the physical design of the spaces both impress and intimidate. By learning and networking in these spaces, GW students develop an edge over other law school graduates.

“The classes at GWNY weren’t theoretical, they were very practical because your professor was talking to a client right before class, touching on issues we were about to learn about,” says Kelly Donahue, JD ’18, an associate at O’Melveny & Myers. Being able to see the deals that managing partners were working on and the sorts of clients retained by each firm opened her eyes to professional opportunities not readily available near the D.C. campus.

“I would not be doing [mergers and acquisitions] at a huge law firm in NY if it hadn’t been for GWNY,” says Ms. Donahue.

“All the major financial institutions are in New York, so you get a front seat to all that’s going on,” says Antonio DiNizo, JD ’19. “You’re getting the networking experience, networking with other GW alumni and other people practicing business law, and that helps you hit the ground running when you get to NY,” he adds. Like so many others who have participated in GWNY, Mr. DiNizo is now an associate at a firm, Proskauer, that he first visited as a GWNY participant in 2017.

Mentoring is another key component of the program, explains Professor Cunningham. Each GWNY participant is typically paired with two mentors—a seasoned practitioner and someone who is early on in their career and can give insight into what it’s really like to be a young associate.

Mr. Rahnama was mentored by Ira Lee Sorkin, JD ’68, and kept up with his restructuring professor, Paul Basta, JD ’92. Mr. Rahnama and Mr. Basta are now at the same firm. Mr. DiNizo likewise keeps up with mentors from his externship at the SEC NYRO, and Ms. Donahue makes a point to meet with current GWNY participants.

Some 70 graduates have participated in GWNY, and all of them now have full-time legal jobs. “The vast majority are in a job they consider their dream job. Solidly half of them attribute their placement to being in the program,” Professor Cunningham says.

“It’s the only program with this breadth and depth of its kind,” he adds. “Other law schools offer programs in Washington and New York, but only GW offers this full package of coursework, externship, networking, and mentoring.”

“That’s the GW difference,” concludes Dean Matthew. “When you are practice ready from GW, you are practice ready not just because we told you about it, but we showed you how to do it with our faculty and alumni who are actually doing it, actually having impact, influence and inspiring change in the world.”