

STUDENT PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION  
AND THE FOUNDATIONAL SKILL OF BUILDING A  
TENT OF PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS TO  
SUPPORT THE STUDENT

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#### INTRODUCTION

This Article is a guide for law faculty and staff who want each student to build a tent of professional relationships—a professional network—that both supports the student and trusts the student to do the work of a lawyer. The importance of professional networks for work performance and career opportunities has been well-established in hundreds of empirical studies.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a growing research literature is documenting that the creation of a professional network requires pro-active networking behaviors—defined as an individual's efforts to develop and maintain professional relationships with others who can potentially assist them in their career or work.<sup>2</sup>

For some students (and lawyers), “networking” with a clear purpose of strengthening support for the student's professional goals feels inauthentic, impure, and perhaps even dirty.<sup>3</sup> To avoid this negative connotation, this Article uses “building a tent of professional relationships who support the student and trust the student to do the work of a lawyer.” This framing, in the author's experience, fits within students' natural understanding of the importance of social support for each person, including the student, and feels authentic and less instrumental to students.

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1. Francesca Gino et al., *Why Connect? Moral Consequences of Networking with a Promotion or Prevention Focus*, 119 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH., 1221, 1221 (2020). For example, successful faculty members know the importance of building a tent of professional relationships in their field as early as possible in their careers. See Troy Heffernan, *Academic Networks and Career Trajectory: 'There's no career in academia without networks'*, 40 HIGHER EDUC. RSCH. & DEV. 981, 982 (2020).

2. Gino et al., *supra* note 1, at 1221.

3. See Tiziana Casciaro et al., *The Contaminating Effects of Building Instrumental Ties: How Networking Can Make Us Feel Dirty*, 59 ADMIN. SCI. Q. 705, 725–26 (2014); Gino et al., *supra* note 1, at 1235. Some of the author's students think that networking is essentially similar to the negative stereotype of a used car salesperson.

Even though the skill of building a tent of professional relationships is so foundational to a student's success in the profession, as of January 2022, only six of the 199 ABA-accredited law schools had adopted a learning outcome requiring this important skill.<sup>4</sup> Villanova University School of Law has the strongest learning outcomes on building a tent of professional relationships. For example, Villanova's Learning Outcome 6 includes: "Graduates will possess competency to communicate and build professional relationships, especially across cultural differences," and Learning Outcome 8 states that "Graduates will possess competency in professional networking."<sup>5</sup>

Part I of this Article explains how educators in the health professions understand that a student's skill in building a tent of professional relationships who support the student and trust the student to do the work of the profession is essential in the formation of each student's professional identity. This body of scholarship emphasizes the importance of "communities of practice" in shaping a new entrant's professional identity. Part II goes into the student's shoes as a new entrant in the 1L year and outlines a step-by-step approach to helping each student build a tent of professional relationships during law school.

#### I. BUILDING A TENT OF PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF EACH STUDENT'S FORMATION OF A PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY.

The health profession's scholarship addresses this professional relationship-building challenge in the context of the formation of each student's professional identity.<sup>6</sup> What is a student's professional identity? Generally speaking, professional identity is a representation of self, achieved in stages over time, during which the foundational values of the profession are internalized, resulting in an individual thinking, acting, and feeling like a member of the profession.<sup>7</sup>

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4. *Standard 302(c) Learning Outcomes*, UNIV. ST. THOMAS SCH. OF L., <https://law.stthomas.edu/about/centers-institutes/holloran-center/learning-outcomes-database/standard-302c-and-d/index.html> (last visited Oct. 12, 2023).

5. *Learning Outcomes*, VILL. U. CHARLES WIDGER SCH. OF L., <https://www1.villanova.edu/content/university/law/academics/learning-outcomes.html> (last visited Oct. 12, 2023).

6. See, e.g., Richard L. Cruess et al., *Reframing Medical Education to Support Professional Identity Formation*, 89 ACAD. MED. 1446, 1446 (2014).

7. *Id.* at 1447 (taking this definition from medical education literature, which includes rich and ample research on the concept of professional identity that helped guide the development of professional identity in legal education). The discussion in this article from notes 6–13 borrows from the Holloran Center definition of student professional identity. See Holloran Center, *What Is a Law Student's Professional Identity and What Is Professional Identity Formation? -- A*

Professional identity formation principally involves a process of socialization.<sup>8</sup> The professional-to-be begins as an outsider to the professional community and its values and ways.<sup>9</sup> Through experiences over time, both inside and outside the classroom and the law school, the individual gradually becomes more and more an insider, “moving from a stance of observer on the outside or periphery of the practice through graduated stages toward becoming a skilled participant at the center of the action.”<sup>10</sup>

The process continues throughout one’s career<sup>11</sup> and features “a series of identity transformations that occur primarily during periods of transition[,]”<sup>12</sup> often marked by anxiety, stress, and risk for the developing professional.<sup>13</sup> This process of socialization is a product of the developing professional’s social interactions and activities in environments authentic to the profession’s culture and enriched by coaching, mentoring, modeling, reflection, and other supportive strategies.<sup>14</sup>

For law students and lawyers more specifically, we can synthesize a succinct definition of professional identity from the Preamble to the Model Rules of Professional Conduct, the four major reports on professionalism from the ABA and the Conference of Chief Justices, and Holloran Center research.<sup>15</sup> For law students and

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*Short Introduction*, UNIV. ST. THOMAS SCH. L. (2022), [https://law.stthomas.edu/\\_media-library/documents/holloran-center/professional-identity-definition.pdf](https://law.stthomas.edu/_media-library/documents/holloran-center/professional-identity-definition.pdf).

8. Cruess et al., *supra* note 6, at 1448 (borrowing again from medical education).

9. William M. Sullivan, *Foreword*, in *TEACHING MEDICAL PROFESSIONALISM: SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY* ix, xii (Richard L. Cruess et al. eds., 2d ed. 2016) [hereinafter *TEACHING MEDICAL PROFESSIONALISM*].)

10. *Id.*; see also Frederic William Hafferty, *Socialization, Professionalism, and Professional Identity Formation*, in *TEACHING MEDICAL PROFESSIONALISM*, *supra* note 10, at 55, 62.

11. Lynn V. Monrouxe, *Theoretical Insights into the Nature and Nurture of Professional Identities*, in *TEACHING MEDICAL PROFESSIONALISM*, *supra* note 10, at 37, 38 (“Our identities are continually *rewritten* throughout our lives as we draw on the environment, from people and from objects for their content.”).

12. Robert Sternszus, *Developing a Professional Identity: A Learner’s Perspective*, in *TEACHING MEDICAL PROFESSIONALISM*, *supra* note 10, at 26, 31.

13. See Cruess et al., *supra* note 6, at 1448.

14. See Yvonne Steinert, *Educational Theory and Strategies to Support Professionalism and Identity Formation*, in *TEACHING MEDICAL PROFESSIONALISM*, *supra* note 10, at 68, 69–71; see also Cruess et al., *supra* note 7, at 1448.

15. See WILLIAM SULLIVAN ET AL., *EDUCATING LAWYERS: PREPARATION FOR THE PROFESSION OF LAW* 128–40 (2007); Neil Hamilton, *Professionalism Clearly Defined*, 18 *PRO. L.* 4–20 (2008); Neil W. Hamilton, *Assessing Professionalism: Measuring Progress in the Formation of an Ethical Professional Identity*, 5 *U. ST. THOMAS L.J.* 470, 482–83 (2008); Neil Hamilton, *Fostering Professional*

lawyers, professional identity is grounded in two foundational norms and values that law students and lawyers must understand, internalize, and demonstrate:

- (1) a deep responsibility and commitment to serving clients, the profession, and the rule of law; and
- (2) a commitment to pro-active continuous professional development toward excellence at all the competencies needed to serve others well in the profession's work.<sup>16</sup>

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*Formation (Professionalism): Lessons From Carnegie Foundation's Five Studies on Educating Professionals*, 45 CREIGHTON L.R. 763, 763–97 (2012).

A longer definition of professional identity for law students and lawyers could include the elements of a fiduciary mindset, using “fiduciary” in the general meaning of founded on trustworthiness and borrowing directly from the language in the Model Rules Preamble and Rule 2.1. Law students and lawyers should understand, internalize, and demonstrate:

- a deep responsibility and service orientation to others, especially the client, whom the student serves in widening circles as the student matures including a commitment to:
- a. zealously protecting and pursuing a client's interests within the bounds of the law while demonstrating respect for the legal system and all persons involved in the legal system;
  - b. improving the law, providing pro bono service to the disadvantaged, developing cultural competence, and promoting a justice system that provides equal access and eliminates bias, discrimination, and racism in the law;
  - c. developing and being guided by personal conscience – including the exercise of “sensitive professional and moral judgment” and the conduct of an “ethical person” – when deciding all the “difficult issues of professional discretion” that arise in the practice of law; and
  - d. developing independent professional judgment, including moral and ethical considerations, to help the client think through decisions that affect others;
  - e. pro-active continuous professional development toward excellence at all the competencies needed to serve others in the profession's work well; and
  - f. compliance with the minimum standards of competency and ethical conduct in the Rules of Professional Conduct.

See Neil Hamilton, *Internalizing a Fiduciary Mindset To Put The Client First*, 24 PRO. L. 1–11 (2017). Note that the language “the importance of cross-cultural competence” and “promote a justice system that provides equal access and eliminates bias, discrimination, and racism in the law” are added by ABA Standard 303, Interpretation 303–6.

16. This is the Holloran Center definition of two foundational values of a law student's professional identity. See Neil Hamilton, *Introduction to the Definition of Professional Identity and the Formation of a Professional Identity*, HOLLORAN CTR. PRO. IDENTITY IMPLEMENTATION BLOG (Sept. 21, 2022), <https://blogs.stthomas.edu/holloran-center/introduction-to-the-definition-of-professional-identity-and-the-formation-of-a-professional-identity/>.

This process of socialization, medical scholarship emphasizes, occurs in communities of practice.<sup>17</sup> A community of practice is a persistent, sustaining social network of individuals who share and develop an overlapping knowledge base, set of foundational values, and experiences focused on a common practice.<sup>18</sup> Medicine, like other occupations, does not consist of just one community of practice, but rather consists of many communities of practice<sup>19</sup> called a “landscape of communities.”<sup>20</sup> Physicians generally belong to more than one community of practice.<sup>21</sup> Medical scholarship notes that communities of practice, similar to other social structures, tend to reproduce themselves by perpetuating existing hierarchies and inequities.<sup>22</sup> It is important that a healthy community of practice be proactive in analyzing and responding to needed changes in the profession and society.

There is also empirical research on the importance of communities of practice for lawyers. Lynn Mather, Craig McEwen, and Richard Maiman conducted lengthy interviews with 167 divorce lawyers in two states where they investigated what guides divorce lawyers in their day-to-day decisions in legal practice.<sup>23</sup> They found that lawyers define their work and make choices through communities of practice: “groups of lawyers with whom they interact and to whom they compare themselves and look for common expectations and standards.”<sup>24</sup> Based on their research, Mather, McEwen, and Maimann posited multiple and overlapping communities of lawyers that provide context for constructing varying versions of legal professionalism.<sup>25</sup>

At the global level, all lawyers in the US share similar education and training, and are bound by similar ethical rules. Next are lawyers who practice in different fields (for example, divorce, criminal, immigration, and corporate). Within the divorce lawyer community, we found further distinctions by, for example, degree of specialization in divorce, class of clientele,

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17. Richard L. Cruess et al., *Medicine as a Community of Practice: Implications for Medical Education*, 93 ACAD. MED. 185, 185–86 (2018).

18. Sasha A. Barab et al., *Developing an Empirical Account of a Community of Practice: Characterizing the Essential Tensions*, 11 J. LEARNING SCIS. 489, 495 (2002).

19. Sylvia R. Cruess et al., *Supporting the Development of a Professional Identity: General Principles*, 41 MED. TCHR. 641, 643 (2019).

20. *Id.*

21. R. Cruess et al., *supra* note 17, at 186.

22. S. Cruess et al., *supra* note 19, at 643.

23. LYNN MATHER ET AL., *DIVORCE LAWYERS AT WORK: VARIETIES OF PROFESSIONALISM IN PRACTICE* vii (2001).

24. *Id.* at 6.

25. Lynn Mather, *Communities of Scholars and Communities of Practice*, 48 J. L. & SOC'Y. 25, 37 (2021).

and organizational setting of practice. Lawyers in these much smaller communities regularly interact with each other and face similar kinds of divorce problems, leading to shared reference points and norms for representing clients.<sup>26</sup>

Medical educators encourage students to take conscious, proactive steps to participate in communities of practice.<sup>27</sup> They provide learners with guided reflection appropriate to the learner's stage of development to help a student join a community of practice.<sup>28</sup>

Borrowing from medical education's experience with communities of practice, this Article proposes that law faculty and staff empower each student to proactively build a community of practice for the student—a tent of professional relationships—that both supports the student and trusts the student to do the work of a lawyer. A student who is proactively building a tent of professional relationships in a framework of guided reflection is demonstrating development to later stages of both professional identity formation learning outcomes discussed above. This type of student development helps the law school to meet the Standard 303(b) requirement that “[a] law school shall provide substantial opportunities to students for . . . (3) the development of a professional identity.”<sup>29</sup> Interpretation 303-5 provides that:

Professional identity focuses on what it means to be a lawyer and the special obligations lawyers have to their clients and society. The development of professional identity should involve an intentional exploration of the values, guiding principles, and well-being practices considered foundational to successful legal practice. Because developing a professional identity requires reflection and growth over time, students should have frequent opportunities for such development during each year of law school and in a variety of courses and co-curricular and professional development activities.<sup>30</sup>

The faculty and staff are also helping each student develop one of the important skills that legal employers and clients want. Based on a practice analysis survey completed by nearly 15,000 lawyers, the National Conference of Bar Examiners Testing Task Force included “Client Relationships and Management” as important skills in the NextGen Bar recommendations.<sup>31</sup> The Task Force defined “Client

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26. *Id.*

27. R. Cruess et al, *supra* note 17, at 188.

28. *Id.* at 189.

29. ABA STANDARDS & RULES OF PROC. FOR APPROVAL OF L. SCHS. 303(b)(3) (2022).

30. *Id.* at 303-5.

31. Nat'l Conf. of Bar Exam'rs, *Final Report of the Testing Task Force*, NEXT GEN BAR EXAM OF THE FUTURE 16 (April 2021),

Relationships and Management” to include “Networking and Business Development” and “Cultural Competence.”<sup>32</sup>

II. A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH FOR A LAW STUDENT TO BUILD A TENT OF PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS—A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE—TO SUPPORT THE STUDENT.

A decade ago, Professor Cristina Lockwood urged law professors in their courses to create communities of practice that would engage in dialogue both inside and outside of the classroom.<sup>33</sup> The students in these communities of practice would help each other and this would enhance learning.<sup>34</sup>

Modifying Lockwood’s proposal that faculty in their courses be the proactive creators of the student communities of practice, this Article suggests that faculty and staff empower each student proactively to build a tent of professional relationships that support the student and trust the student to do the work of a lawyer. The discussion below outlines a step-by-step approach for the faculty and staff to help each student proactively build a tent of professional relationships.<sup>35</sup>

A. *The first step is to go into the student’s shoes and offer enlightened, self-interested reasons why professional relationship tent-building is important for the student.*

1. The first enlightened, self-interested reason is that in the author’s experience (and the student can confirm this by asking practicing lawyers and judges with whom the student interacts), all effective and successful lawyers, regardless of practice area, have built and are continuing to build a tent of professional relationships who both support them and trust them to do the work. “In the early years of practice, a lawyer needs professional relationships with experienced lawyers and clients who trust the new lawyer enough to give them work.”<sup>36</sup> “In addition, in the new lawyer’s work as an advocate for their client, the lawyer’s professional relationships that

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<https://nextgenbarexam.ncbex.org/wp-content/uploads/TTF-Final-Report-April-2021.pdf>.

32. *Id.*

33. Cristina D. Lockwood, *Improving Learning in the Law School Classroom by Encouraging Students to Form Communities of Practice*, 20 CLINICAL L. REV. 95, 119–20 (2013).

34. *Id.* at 135.

35. This section borrows from the fourth chapter of the author’s forthcoming book with ABA Publishing, NEIL HAMILTON, ROADMAP: THE LAW STUDENT’S GUIDE TO MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT (3d ed. 2023). The book provides step-by-step guidance for students to create both a written professional development plan and a companion building-a-tent-of-professional-relationships plan to achieve meaningful post-graduation employment.

36. *Id.* at 52.

create trust with decision-makers and adversaries greatly benefit the lawyer's client."<sup>37</sup> In the words of Katherian Roe, Chief Federal Public Defender for the District of Minnesota,

In law school, I disliked networking because I am an introvert, and I thought those other people are not like me and we have nothing in common. This was a serious misunderstanding on my part. After I started practicing criminal defense, I realized that in order to achieve good results for my clients and to create the changes I hoped for in the law, I had to have a wide network of people who knew me and trusted my work. I had to become a seed planter in as wide a circle of people as I could. It is not easy, but it is absolutely necessary.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, the authors of a 2016 empirical study of the factors that influence the promotion to partner in a big law firm include being able to create strong professional relationships.<sup>39</sup> According to the book *Accelerating Lawyer Success: How to Make Partner, Stay Healthy, and Flourish in the Law Firm*,

We found that lawyers who make partner within 10 years tend to have certain characteristics in common. For starters, they are highly networked within their firms. They are not just connected personally to their colleagues; they also know how to use others' expertise. In other words, partners don't just know people. They know who knows what, and are able to strategically leverage that information to get their work done effectively and efficiently. Beyond having a strong sense of where expertise lies in the firm, partners tend to develop more effective informal mentoring relationships than those who do not make partner.<sup>40</sup>

Lawyers who make partner are more likely to report having multiple informal mentors who played a role in their career development; 57% of lawyers who made partner reported having three or more informal mentors who influenced their careers compared to only 26% who did not make partner.<sup>41</sup> In other words, having one mentor is simply not sufficient to excel.<sup>42</sup> Having multiple mentors will boost your chances of getting that brass ring.<sup>43</sup>

And remember, it is not enough to merely have informal mentors; it is up to you to be proactive and develop those relationships so that

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37. *Id.*

38. Katherian Roe, Dist. of Minn. Chief Fed. Pub. Def., at a University of St. Thomas Law Employment Advisory Committee Meeting (May 17, 2013).

39. LORI BERMAN ET AL., *ACCELERATING LAWYER SUCCESS* 1–3, 7 (2016).

40. *Id.* at 7.

41. *Id.* at 11.

42. *Id.*

43. *Id.*

you get as much out of them as possible. Your mentors won't know what you need until you ask them — so, ask!<sup>44</sup>

So, if you want to make partner, spend time working on your interpersonal skills. Most importantly, never forget how crucial relationships are to success.<sup>45</sup>

Whenever the student is with practicing lawyers or judges, encourage the student to ask them about the importance of relationship building in their professional life. Ask what was most effective for them to build professional relationships when they were in law school and early in their career.

2. The second enlightened, self-interested reason for a student to build a tent of professional relationships is that each student needs to gain a breadth of experiences doing the work of a lawyer during the student's remaining time in law school so that they can:

1. thoughtfully discern the student's passion, motivating interests, and strengths that best fit with a geographic community of practice, a practice area and type of client, and type of employer;
2. develop the student's strengths to the next level; and
3. have evidence of the student's strengths that employers value.

If a student achieves all three of the above goals, the student has discerned the student's "fit" between the student's strengths and the legal employers' and clients' needs.

To reach the student's professional goals in terms of post-graduation meaningful employment, the student needs to build a tent of professional relationships that both support the student and trust the student to do the work of a lawyer. The student has limited time and energy for professional relationship-building while in law school, so the student must prioritize the most effective relationship-building steps at each stage of their development. The discussion following presents a progression of steps that will be useful to achieve this goal, but the student can do them in whatever order makes the most sense to the student.

*B. An outline of the most effective steps to use the student's limited time and energy to build the student's tent.*

The author's book, *Roadmap: A Law Student's Guide to Meaningful Employment*, explains that (1) the required curriculum in law schools emphasizes the technical capacities and skills in Table 1 below, but provides much less development of the capacities and skills in Table 2 below.<sup>46</sup>

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44. *Id.*

45. *Id.*

46. HAMILTON, *supra* note 35, at 1–5.

**The Skills and Capacities that Empirical Studies Show Legal Employers and Clients Need<sup>47</sup>**

**Table 1: Traditional Technical Competencies That Law Schools Emphasize**

1. Knowledge of doctrinal law in the basic subject areas
2. Legal analysis
3. Legal research
4. Written and oral communication in the legal context
5. Legal judgment
6. Knowledge of the law-of-lawyering responsibilities to clients and the legal system

The additional competencies that the empirical studies indicate clients and legal employers need from lawyers in changing markets are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2: Additional Competencies Empirical Studies Indicate That Clients and Legal Employers Need**

1. Superior client focus and responsiveness to the client
2. Exceptional understanding of the client's context and business
3. Effective communication skills, including listening and knowing your audience
4. Client-centered creative problem-solving abilities and good professional judgment
5. Ownership over continuous professional development (taking initiative) of both the traditional technical competencies in Table 1, the client relationship competencies above, and the capacities and skills 6 -11 below.
6. Teamwork and collaboration
7. Strong work ethic
8. Conscientiousness and attention to detail
9. Grit and resilience
10. Organization and management of legal work (project management)
11. An entrepreneurial mindset to serve clients more effectively and efficiently in changing markets (this includes understanding technology to reduce costs)

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47. NEIL HAMILTON & LOUIS D. BILIONIS, LAW STUDENT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND FORMATION, BRIDGING LAW SCHOOL, STUDENT, AND EMPLOYER GOALS 10–11 (2022).

ABA Standard 303 Interpretation 303-6 also specifically identifies cross-cultural competency as necessary for client-centered relationship skills, problem-solving, and good judgment.<sup>48</sup>

Law students must proactively seek professional experiences to test “fit,” develop the Table 1 and Table 2 capacities and skills doing the actual work of a lawyer, and have evidence that they can do the work of a lawyer. In this process of seeking and engaging in these experiences that mimic the actual work of a lawyer, the student will build a tent of professional relationships that support the student and trust the student to do the work.<sup>49</sup>

What does it mean for an experienced lawyer or professor to trust that a student can do the work of a lawyer? This means that the experienced lawyer/professor is seeing enough of the student’s work for an informed professional judgment about:

- the student’s Table 1 capacities and skills, particularly legal research, legal analysis, and written and oral communication skills; and
- the student’s Table 2 capacities and skills, particularly strong work ethic, conscientiousness and attention to detail, project management skills, and teamwork and collaboration skills.

Typically, in the author’s experience, at the end of the semester a student’s 1L required course doctrinal professors in large sections will usually have an informed professional judgment about the student’s knowledge of the doctrinal law in the subject area, legal analysis, and written and oral communication skills. The student’s lawyering skills professor will also have an informed judgment about research skills.<sup>50</sup> In smaller sections, a professor may have seen enough work to have an informed professional judgment about other Table 1 and Table 2 capacities and skills.

Experienced lawyers/professors working on projects with a new entrant particularly want high-quality research, analysis, and writing delivered with total reliability that is on time and shows good teamwork, attention to detail, and quick learning from mistakes.<sup>51</sup> Students should be looking for opportunities with experienced lawyers and professors to demonstrate these capacities and skills that

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48. ABA STANDARDS & RULES OF PROC. FOR APPROVAL OF L. SCHS. (2022–23) Interpretation 303-6.

49. HAMILTON & BILIONIS, *supra* note 47, at 52.

50. HAMILTON, *supra* note 35, at 58; *see also* HAMILTON & BILIONIS, *supra* note 47, at 23 (listing the NCBE’s rankings of the most critical skills and abilities for newly licensed lawyers).

51. HAMILTON, *supra* note 35, at 59; *see also* HAMILTON & BILIONIS, *supra* note 47, at 10–11 (explaining a Foundational Competencies Model that synthesizes empirical data from eleven studies of the capacities and skills needed to meet client and employer needs).

lead them to trust the student to do the work. Experienced lawyers/professors usually will then have sufficient evidence of the student's strengths to provide a strong recommendation.<sup>52</sup>

In the author's experience, the big law, elite government, and judicial clerkship employers require high grades in the 1L required courses. All the other employers want to see grades high enough to predict strong probabilities of bar passage.<sup>53</sup> Grades are a predictor that you have some of the needed capacities and skills to do the work of a lawyer.<sup>54</sup> Once a student is actually doing the work of new entrants on projects with experienced lawyers and professors and lawyers observe the student's work, they can move beyond a prediction and say that the student performs well at the full range of needed capacities and skills.

Students should remember that in all seven building-a-tent-of-professional-relationships steps below, the student wants to "lean" the student's tent-building efforts in any time period to help the student with experiences that will be insightful into the student's fit with the highest priority given to geographic area, area of practice/type of client, and type of employer. After significant experiences, the student should reflect; then, if the student changes the top priorities regarding geographic area, area of practice/type of client, or type of employer, the student should then changes the student's "lean" on tent-building efforts.

*1. Initial steps the student should take in building a tent of professional relationships*

Step 1. Establish a relationship with one of the student's career services office professionals.

Ask them to review the student's written professional development plan, resume, and cover letter to the student's target potential employers. Then, ask them to help to line up a good summer experience between the student's 1L and 2L years if the student has not yet secured it. Also, ask for a mock interview.

Step 2. If the student's grades in any required course indicate a risk of bar pass problems, the student should establish a relationship with the student's academic support professionals.

The school's academic support professionals will be enormously helpful to both advise a student on whether the student may be at some risk concerning bar passage and to help the student create and implement a written professional development plan to ensure that the student will pass the bar.

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52. HAMILTON, *supra* note 35, at 55.

53. HAMILTON & BILIONIS, *supra* note 47, at 3.

54. HAMILTON, *supra* note 35, at 55.

2. *The next tent-building steps in the 1L year*

Step 3. If the student does not have a good summer experience lined up yet, they should focus on relationships that will lead to a good summer experience.

If a student does not yet have good paid or unpaid summer experience between the 1L and 2L years lined up to test whether the student's top priority areas of employment interest are a good fit and to further develop the student's strengths and have evidence of the student's growth, the sub-steps below will help the student achieve this goal.

a. The school's career services professionals will have suggestions to help the student with this goal.

b. The student has a natural network of relationships with experienced lawyers and judges who will help the student find a good summer experience, including giving the student a twenty-minute informational interview.<sup>55</sup> Nathan Perez and Marcia Ballinger in *The 20-Minute Networking Meeting* conclude that approximately 70% of all jobs are obtained by candidates who come to an employer's attention through employee recommendations, referrals from trusted associates, or direct contact with a candidate who may be interviewing for a job.<sup>56</sup> They recommend seeking twenty-minute informational meetings to create brief, meaningful professional relationships that will lead to new information about your field, new contacts, and possibly more proactive steps to help you.<sup>57</sup> The twenty-minute informational meeting consists of a great first impression, a brief overview of your value proposition, a good discussion of your questions, and a strong ending.<sup>58</sup> The Holloran Center has a summary of these elements of a twenty-minute informational meeting at the link in the footnote.<sup>59</sup>

The list below includes a student's natural network of lawyers who would respond to the student's request for an informational meeting.<sup>60</sup>

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55. I am grateful for suggestions on this concept of natural networks from Susan Fines, Monica Gould, and Robin Thorner.

56. NATHAN A. PEREZ & MARCIA BALLINGER, *THE 20-MINUTE NETWORKING MEETING—PROFESSIONAL EDITION: LEARN TO NETWORK. GET A JOB.* (2016).

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.*

59. Neil Hamilton, *Roadmap for Employment*, UNIV. ST. THOMAS SCH. OF L., [https://law.stthomas.edu/about/centers-institutes/holloran-center/research-training/employment-roadmap/#\\_ftnref1](https://law.stthomas.edu/about/centers-institutes/holloran-center/research-training/employment-roadmap/#_ftnref1) (last visited Oct. 12, 2023).

60. *How to Network Like a Pro in Law School*, L. MONTHLY (Jan. 27, 2022), <https://www.lawyer-monthly.com/2022/01/how-to-network-like-a-pro-in-law-school/>.

- Alumni of the student's law school in the geographic and practice areas that are the student's top priorities.
- Lawyer alumni of the student's undergraduate school in the geographic and practice areas that are the student's top priorities. The alumni office of the student's alma mater may help.
- There may be connections to lawyers through the student's family and friend groups, previous work experiences, or social/athletic/community/church/volunteer/political groups.
- Upper-class students in the student's student organizations will have suggestions on what worked best for them at the student's stage.
- Speakers at the law school including student organizations will talk to the student.
- The student's professors may need summer help on a project and the student should ask them.
- Library and other staff at the law school beyond career services staff will help a student.

c. If a summer experience that pays is not available, a student should consider volunteering with organizations that appeal to them and offer part-time help pro bono. The bar associations in the geographic area where the student will spend the summer will have a list of pro bono opportunities for lawyers.<sup>61</sup> Note that the student could combine summer courses with volunteer work to get experience.

Step 4. Professional relationships with professors—both full-time and adjunct—who have seen the student's work sufficiently to trust that the student can do the work of a lawyer.

In the 1L year, the student should make a focused effort to get to know one professor outside of class reasonably well, so the professor has some evidence of the student's Table 2 strengths. In the 2L year, the student should take a seminar or supervised research involving a significant project and multiple drafts working with a professor. Focus on the capacities and skills mentioned above in the discussion of how an experienced lawyer or professor builds trust that the student can do the work of a lawyer. The goal by the end of the 2L year is that at least two professors have worked with the student sufficiently on projects to trust that the student can do the work of a lawyer and have evidence of the student's strengths. The student should keep a list of the projects they have done for a professor in a

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61. See, e.g., *Additional Pro Bono Projects*, N.C. PRO BONO RES. CTR., <http://ncprobono.org/volunteer/> (last visited Oct. 12, 2023); *Pro Bono Network*, N.Y. STATE BAR ASS'N, <https://nysba.org/pro-bono-network/> (last visited Oct. 12, 2023); *Pro Bono Opportunities Directory*, STATE BAR OF CAL., <https://www.calbar.ca.gov/Access-to-Justice/Pro-Bono/Pro-Bono-Directory> (last visited Oct. 12, 2023).

file so that when the student asks for a reference, the student can remind the professor what was done.

3. *Continuing tent-building steps in the 2L and 3L years*

Step 5. Professional relationships with practicing lawyers and judges who have seen the student's work sufficiently to trust that the student can do the work of a lawyer.

Empirical data makes clear that legal employment and recommendations from practitioners or judges are the top two most helpful criteria for employers hiring students for post-graduation employment.<sup>62</sup> The ideal goal here is that by the end of the summer between the 2L and 3L years, the student has at least two practicing lawyers or judges who both have seen enough of the student's work on projects to trust that they can do the work of a lawyer and will provide a strong recommendation showing evidence of the student's strengths.

The experienced lawyer or judge giving the student work is essentially the student's client at this stage of development, and the student is developing and demonstrating the Table 2 capacities and skills in this context. One of the author's students who has built a very successful entertainment law practice (before law school he was a band leader and his passion is helping musicians) emphasizes,

It is not about you. It is about them; we are passionate about helping clients [including the experienced lawyer giving you work] solve problems and not just technical legal problems. They can feel if you are passionate about helping them. Over time, work to find your passion in helping them. Build trust. Everything else will take care of itself.<sup>63</sup>

A student can ask an experienced lawyer or judge who has seen the student's work for a reference. The student should keep a list of the projects they have done for a practicing lawyer or judge in a file so that when asking for a reference, the student can remind them what was done.

Step 6. Building relationships with mentors and coaches.

Inspired by Ida Abbott, a leading scholar on mentoring in the legal profession, the author understands mentoring to be a relationship-based process that helps individuals learn, grow and achieve high levels of professional success and fulfillment.<sup>64</sup> Mentoring occurs when a more experienced and trusted lawyer takes

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62. See Hamilton & Bilonis, *supra* note 47, at 144 tbl.25.

63. Comment from Ken Abdo to the author on May 3, 2017.

64. See Hamilton & Bilonis, *supra* note 47, at 76; *Mentoring*, IDA ABBOTT CONSULTING, <https://idaabbott.com/mentoring/> (last visited Oct. 12, 2023).

an interest in a student's career development and success.<sup>65</sup> Mentors have relevant work and career experience, provide career and psychological support, and can create or directly affect career-enhancing opportunities.<sup>66</sup>

John Whitmore, author of the first book on workplace coaching,<sup>67</sup> defines coaching as "unlocking people's potential to increase their own performance."<sup>68</sup> "It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them."<sup>69</sup> Coaching supports people "to clarify their purpose and vision, achieve their goals, and reach their potential."<sup>70</sup> Whitmore believes mentoring is more about sharing expertise and passing down knowledge with some guidance.<sup>71</sup>

Mentoring emphasizes relationship-based career support for students by mentors with relevant work and career experience who use their own experience, insight, and advice to help mentees learn and progress.<sup>72</sup> Coaching focuses on developing a student's self-understanding and discernment of purpose, vision, and goals, and the student's self-direction in terms of the creation and implementation of a plan to achieve the student's vision and goals.<sup>73</sup> Abbott points out that the lines between mentoring and coaching are fluid since both roles "provide individualized and personal support by a trusted advisor."<sup>74</sup> She also notes that "as coaching becomes more popular, boundaries between mentoring and coaching will blur and overlap."<sup>75</sup>

Each student needs a mentor/coach. Ideally, the student will proactively build a professional relationship with one or more mentors/coaches who have the skills in Table 3 below.<sup>76</sup>

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65. IDA ABBOTT, *LAWYERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT* 212 (2d ed. 2012).

66. IDA ABBOTT, *THE LAWYER'S GUIDE TO MENTORING* 42–43 (2d ed. 2018).

67. JOHN WHITMORE, *COACHING FOR PERFORMANCE* 1 (5th ed. 2017).

68. *Id.* at 246.

69. *Id.* at 248.

70. *Id.*

71. *Id.* at 14, 249.

72. Neil Hamilton, *Mentor/Coach: The Most Effective Curriculum to Foster Each Student's Professional Development and Formation*, 17 *UNIV. ST. THOMAS L.J.* 836, 852 (2022).

73. *Id.* at 851–52.

74. ABBOTT, *supra* note 66, at 41.

75. *Id.* at 38.

76. This table was first published in Hamilton, *supra* note 73, at 855.

**Table 3**  
**Foundational Competencies for a Law Student's  
 Mentor/Coach**

Actively listening to understand the student's developmental stage and goals;
Asking powerful, open questions to foster the student's guided reflection and self-assessment and raise the student's awareness and responsibility;
Facilitating student growth toward later stages of the Table 1 and Table 2 capacities and skills by transforming learning and insight (especially learning and insight from professional experiences doing the work of a lawyer) into clear and realistic goals, options, and action <sup>77</sup> ; and
Understanding and respecting the student's context and identity and providing support, empathy, and concern for the student.

The student can see how valuable a mentor/coach with the capacities and skills in Table 3 will be for the student's professional development. Recall the empirical findings earlier in this Article about the importance of mentors to lawyers who made partner in a big firm.<sup>78</sup>

Recruiting a mentor/coach to help the student is an art form where the student improves with practice. If the school has a formal program to match the student with a mentor, the student should try the program. The challenge is that formal mentor-matching programs may or may not lead to a mentor/coach for you with the skills in Table 3. In addition, for an experienced lawyer/judge to invest in a student as a mentor/coach, there must be some "chemistry" between the student and the mentor/coach. This type of relationship takes some time to grow. Here are some ideas to help the student be proactive in recruiting mentors/coaches.

The student may already have a mentor/coach in their professional network. It may be an experienced lawyer or judge for whom they have been working. If the student has done some work for an experienced lawyer or judge and they have appreciated and valued the work, then the student has a start on building a mentor/coach relationship. The student should make a proactive effort to grow that relationship into an ongoing and continuing relationship. The student can add value to an experienced lawyer's life. For example, read blogs/articles in their practice area and on the future of legal work and the profession. Experienced lawyers want to know about these topics and the new generation's views on these topics.

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77. WHITMORE, *supra* note 67, at 254.

78. See *supra* notes 40–41 and accompanying text.

The student can ask experienced lawyers or judges for whom the student has worked how they found mentors and coaches. The student can ask them who are the lawyers or judges they most admire and whether they would make an introduction for the student to meet them.

Step 7. Expanding the student's tent of professional relationships.

In any time period, the student should stay focused on building a tent of professional relationship on the student's current highest priority areas of practice, type of client, and type of employer that the student wants to explore. A particularly effective way to develop a student's relationships with practicing lawyers and judges in the student's area of highest interest is to find out what type of pro bono/volunteer work these lawyers and judges do.<sup>79</sup> The student can join in contributing to the work.

A student can join the bar association section in the student's areas of highest interest and attend events and CLEs. Attend student organization or law school events where practicing lawyers/judges are speaking. Focus on a meaningful conversation with one or two experienced lawyers who will remember the student's name. Then, follow up. If a student is reading blogs/articles about the practice area, the student has topics to ask them about that they will find interesting. The student can offer to help the executive committee of the relevant bar section with a project.

Note the importance of a student's cross-cultural skills in this type of outreach. A student should be intentional about building professional relationships that develop these skills. A student can assess the student's stage of development in cross-cultural relationship skills and read some suggestions on how to build these skills at the link in the footnote below.<sup>80</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The skill of proactively building a tent of professional relationships who support and trust each student to do the work of a lawyer is foundational for each student's success in law school and each graduate's success in the practice of law. This Article explains how this skill—particularly framed in terms of proactively building communities of practice around the student—fosters each student's

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79. See *Volunteer Opportunities for Attorneys*, N.C. PRO BONO RES. CTR. (2023), <https://ncprobono.org/opportunities/> (explaining that “participating in pro bono legal service benefits [one] as a practitioner” because it allows one to “expand[] [her] professional network”).

80. See, e.g., *Assessing Intercultural Competence*, UNIV. OF MICH. CTR. FOR RSCH. ON LEARNING & TEACHING (2021), <https://crlt.umich.edu/interculturalcompetence>.

growth toward later stages of development regarding the student's professional identity. Finally, the Article provides faculty and staff with a map of seven steps that each student can use effectively to build the student's tent of support. Student growth to later stages of development on this skill benefits not only the student, but also the law school in terms of stronger employment outcomes and alumni success.