

Law Student Stress

The process of identifying sources of stress and developing programs and environmental interventions at a law school can have various applications to student affairs.

ABSTRACT

In this article we describe a study of law student stressors. A sample of students at the College of Law, University of Florida, was asked to list its top three stressors. These stressors were then categorized and analyzed. Suggestions for programs and environmental interventions to alleviate some of these stressors are described.

LAW STUDENT STRESS

Lawyers, like other helping professionals, must deal with stress frequently. One reason for their stress symptoms is the close contact they have with the emotional, psychological, and social problems of their clients (Maslach & Jackson, 1978). Another is a result of the vulnerable position they put themselves in by taking responsibility for a client's legal claim while often acting in a climate of ambiguity and uncertainty (Mestsner & Schrag, 1979). The demanding nature of this profession can lead to overwork, particularly for lawyers who have not learned to regulate their work/rest/recreation balance (Rhoads, 1977).

As an occupational group, lawyers, especially those in general practice, are prone to heart disease, a disease linked to an inability to manage work stress and emotional strain (Russek & Russek, 1976). In one study comparing doctors and lawyers, researchers found that lawyers drank and smoked more, were more subject to high blood pressure, and were less happy with their work (Middleton, 1981). The data gathered in the Middleton (1981) and other studies (Barry & Connelly, 1978; Kobasa, 1982) suggest that much of this excessive stress may have its origins in law school.

James Archer, Jr., Director, Counseling Center, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611

Martha M. Peters, Stress Management and Educational Consultant, College of Law, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611

Faculty, students, and other observers describe the emotional stress in law school and particularly in the first year as being great, but the documented research is scarce (Pipkin, 1976; Schwartz, 1980; Taylor, 1975). A number of studies indicate that the first year of law school is very stressful (Patton, 1968; Silver, 1968; Watson, 1968). Stevens (1973) found that 50% of the first-semester students he surveyed reported tension. Beck and Bums (1979) concluded that anxiety and depression associated with the stress of law school underlie most problems of law students. They reported that students from all classes sought out the student affairs/services dean for stress-related help; however, 80% of the students seen were first-year students. Eron and Redmont (1957), on the other hand, reported that the level of anxiety for law students did not change significantly over the 3 years of law school.

There is considerable agreement on the major law school stressors. The Socratic method of teaching, high expectations, competitive environment, heavy work load, final examinations, social isolation, and family tension have been identified as stressors, though they are not necessarily ranked in that order (Silver, 1968; Taylor, 1975; Watson, 1968). The Socratic method of teaching is different from what most students have experienced as undergraduates or in other graduate schools. The lack of feedback involved in answering a question with another question rather than the accustomed "right" or "wrong" answer can be disconcerting for students who are trying to figure out how they are faring in a new environment (Silver, 1968). The absence of any response, except another question, has been criticized by Watson (1968) as unnecessarily alienating for students, as antithetical to research on learning, and as different from what Socrates himself practiced. Also, the development of critical thinking and persuasion skills as the main mode of problem solving may interfere with the more empathic, supportive skills needed in a family or support relationship (Goodfield, 1978), and family or other social support is an important element in managing stress (Cobb, 1976).

Since standards for entrance to law schools accredited by the American Bar Association are high, most law students are accustomed to being at the top of their classes. When these students are graded on a competitive curve, only a few will be able to earn the grades they have earned in the past (Silver, 1968). This breeds a competitive environment in what may already be a self-selected aggressive group (Robert & Winter, 1978).

Since stress is clearly a factor in law schools and since excessive stress can be debilitating, life-threatening, and, at the very least, a serious interference to performance (Archer, 1982; Pelletier, 1977), it is important to examine law school stressors with an eye toward possible interventions to reduce unnecessary stress. If some of these stressors are identified and modified, the learning environment of law schools can be improved and the possibility that law students will develop habits and attitudes that perpetuate a stressful life style can be reduced. This study is an attempt to begin this process by identifying the major student stressors at a large competitive southeastern university's law school.

METHOD

Sample and population. A sample of 367 law students was drawn from a total population of 993 students yielding a 37% sample. The sample included 93 first-semester students, 90 second-semester students, 85 second-year students, 41 third-year students, and 58 postgraduate tax law students. In the sample, 115 students identified themselves as female and 247 as male (5 did not identify themselves by sex). Also, 339 identified themselves as White, 13 as Black, 1 as Asian-American, and 12 as Hispanic.

Survey. The one-page survey consisted of six demographic items: (a) age, (b) sex, (c) -class, (d) marital/relationship status, (e) ethnic/racial background, and (f) family/relationship status. Law students were asked to list *in order of importance* the three academic, social, or personal situations or conditions that they found were most stressful. Fifteen categories were developed from the responses given by students (Table 1). Student responses were placed into these categories by a counseling psychologist and an educational psychologist working independently. A sample of 108 student responses was rated to establish reliability. The raters agreed upon 91% of the categorizations.

Table 1
Law School Stressors-Frequency and Percent of Responses in Each Category

Stressor	Frequency	
	N=363	%
Lack of feedback/examination system	199	54.8
Personal relationships	109	29.9
Other	103	28.2
Classes	97	26.5
Time pressure	92	25.2
Worry about future professional success	76	20.8
Competitive environment-GPA	74	20.3
Finances	44	12.1
Heavy academic demands	43	11.8
Writing assignments	35	9.6
Social isolation	34	9.3
Professors	28	7.7
Adjusting to law school	27	7.4
Feelings of inadequacy	24	6.6
Public speaking	19	5.2

Note: These percentage values do not sum to 100 since some questionnaires lacked complete responses (i.e., did not give three responses). In such cases, these responses were included in the total N but did not account for responses in any specific category.

All of the surveys were completed during law school class time. Most professors who were approached were cooperative, and the Dean's Office gave its approval for this survey method. The survey generally took from 3 to 5 minutes to complete. Student names or personal identification data were not requested, and an envelope was provided for the student responses that was then sealed and sent to the researchers.

Analysis. Frequency and percentage of combined stressor responses (first, second, and third place) were calculated for each of the 15 categories. A chi-square test of proportions was used to ascertain differences in proportions for different groups listing different stressor. These group comparisons included an analysis of sex, age, class, and marital/relationship status.

RESULTS

Items in the most frequently listed stress category, which involves stressors related to the examination system and the lack of performance feedback, were listed by 54.8% of the law students (see Table 2). Stressors related to personal relationships were included by 29.9% of the students. Many students relate difficulties in maintaining relationships to the heavy time demands of law school. In all, 26.6% of the students listed stressors related to classes with most of those connected in some way to the Socratic method of teaching. Many students (25.2%) gave time pressure as a major stressor, 20.8% listed worry about professional success, and 20.3% cited the competitive environment of the law school. Additional stress category frequencies and percentages are listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Sex Differences in Stressor Category Frequency

Stressor	Female (N = 115)		Male (N = 249)		P-Value χ^2
	Freq	%	Freq	%	
Time pressure	38	33.0	54	21.8	.03
Worry about future professional success	10	8.7	65	26.2	.0004
Adjusting to law school	2	1.7	25	10.1	.006
Personal relationships	48	41.7	61	24.6	.0035

There are some differences between male and female law students in terms of the proportion listing particular stressor categories (see Table 2). Males more often listed stressors in the "worry about future success" category, and in the "adjusting to law school" category. Females listed "personal relationship" and "time pressure" stressors more often than did males.

There are also differences among students in different class categories in several stressor frequency categories. First-semester students and postgraduate tax law students

more often listed stressors in the "classes" category. Third-year students rated "future and professional success" higher than any other class (see Table 3).

Table 3
Academic Classification Differences in Stressor Category Frequency

Stressor	N = 93		N = 90		N = 86		N = 42		N = 58		P-Value χ^2
	1st Semester		2nd Semester		2nd Year		3rd Year		Tax Law Program		
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	
Classes	31	33.7	20	23.5	20	23.5	4	9.5	21	36.2	.0429
Worry about future professional success	4	4.4	8	9.4	19	22.4	26	61.9	19	32.8	.0001

There are differences among relationship/family status groups in several stress categories. Single students reported more social isolation stressors; and competitive environment stressors. Married students and students with ongoing, intimate relationships reported more time pressure stressors and stressors related to professors (see Table 4).

Table 4
Relationship/Family Status Differences in Stressor Category Frequency

Stressor	N=94		N = 176		N=95		P-Value χ^1
	Married		Single		Ongoing Intimate Relationship		
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	
Social isolation	5	5.3	25	14.6	4	4.3	.0091
Time pressure	32	34.1	33	19.3	26	28.0	.0494
Competitive environment-GPA	19	20.2	44	25.7	11	11.8	.0482
Professors	13	13.8	6	3.5	7	7.5	.0104

Comparisons of groups according to residence, ethnicity, and age differences did not yield any useful information because the number of students in some of the categories was too small for comparisons.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overwhelming, primary stressor category, lack of feedback/examination system, is clearly related to the policy of a single, end-of-term examination as the primary grade determiner at the law school under study. This system is functional for a professor of a large class, but its value as a learning system is questionable. An effective examination system should be part of a feedback system that continually gives students information about their performance so they can adjust their ineffective or inaccurate responses or patterns. It also provides timely reinforcement for appropriate responses.

Consideration should be given to modifying the end-of-term exam system. At the very least a practice exam or two should be given, particularly to new students. This would give them some indication of their performance. Other supportive programs designed to help students develop adequate study and exam-preparation techniques should be explored. Programs using upperclass students as helpers would have the added benefit of increasing noncompetitive contact among students.

Stress management programs to help students learn more effective ways of minimizing stress would also be very useful. Employment of a professional psychologist and frequent consultations from the university counseling center or mental health center could be utilized to develop these programs.

Since this study was completed and reported to the University of Florida College of Law, a number of stress management programs and services have been developed:

1. Most professors now have at least one sample final on reserve in the library for students to study and to use in preparing for exams. Several professors are now giving practice exams or sample questions to first-semester students 1 month to 6 weeks before the end of the term.
2. The law school at which this study was performed has employed an educational psychologist who gives a series of voluntary workshops that include material on study skills, exam preparation, and stress management.
3. Students are encouraged to join one or two study groups for the classes of their choice conducted by upper-class students.

About 30% of the students surveyed listed stressors related to personal relationships. The comments ran in two veins. First, many students reported being isolated and unable to form intimate relationships (this was also reported as social isolation). Second, many students who were currently in some kind of intimate relationship indicated that they were unable to put enough time and energy into their relationships. Many felt that as law students they were just not able to be fully functioning human beings.

Since support from close friends or a spouse is a major necessity for people under extreme stress, the high ranking of this stress category is disturbing. It is interesting to note that women chose stressors in this category more frequently than men. This fits with what is known about sex role socialization in that men often do not recognize or admit their need for interpersonal support. This male defensive characteristic makes the high ranking of this stressor even worse because one can hypothesize that a much larger percentage of men have problems in this area but do not admit them. These results also fit with the results of studies reported earlier in this paper (Robert & Winter, 1978).

It is difficult to prescribe solutions to this problem since the main difficulty seems to be lack of time. Perhaps it is important to remind law school faculty of some of the

personal hazards brought about by ever-increasing student work loads. It may be that just an increased sensitivity on the part of faculty would be of great benefit.

Attempts should be made to break down the isolation that students report. Anything that brings students together with their classmates or with other professional and graduate students would be useful. Law student organizations can develop programs and activities with other graduate and professional departments.

Relationship counseling should also be readily available for law students. Because of the intensity of stressors in law school, it is probably more difficult for students to form and maintain intimate relationships. The communication and time management skills that relationship counseling addresses would decrease students' stress in law school and provide them with skills and knowledge to help deal with significant relationships as practicing attorneys.

The last major stress area relates to worry about future professional success. Third-year students who are soon to face the job market reported this most frequently; however, worry about the future seems to be an underlying concern and a major reason why so much competition exists for grades. In one sense the problem here is structural. With an oversupply of lawyers, students without top grades have a very difficult time in the job market. On the other hand, medical students are usually guaranteed future employment. This factor may account for the higher levels of stress reported for law students (Heins, et al., 1983). One solution is to restrict the number of students admitted to law school so that once admitted a student can be relatively assured of initial employment. A modification of the top-to-bottom ranking system could allow several different measures of potential rather than only the class rank..

A number of stressors and programs has been suggested here. Interventions need to be made on a systemic level, such as a modification of the law feedback examination system and on a service/educational level to help law students learn better stress-management techniques. Counseling and preventive mental health programs are necessary in this high-stress era. Every law school should have a student support system using specially hired personnel or a specially assigned counselor or psychologist from the university counseling/psychological services center.

Studies of the effects of stress on practicing members of the legal profession are needed to further explore the possible effects of law school stress in the subsequent career years and to examine the specific effects of excessive stress on practicing attorneys.

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Note: The format differ slightly from the original NASPA Journal.

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