Building a New Generation of Lawyer Leaders

Where have all the leaders gone? We hear the question repeatedly. Amid business and corporate scandals, political gridlock, a struggling economy, unprecedented levels of unemployment, and ever more coarsening debates in the public square, honest and principled leaders of integrity appear to be in short supply. The nation, indeed the world, is looking for these leaders who can rise above petty self-interest or personal aggrandizement to build a better society for ourselves and our children.

Traditionally, lawyers have been among the members of our communities whom we expected to assume leadership roles, especially in difficult times. Now, some studies show, fewer lawyers are involved in civic and public life than have been in more than a generation. Just as unsettling are the public’s declining admiration and plummeting respect for lawyers. According to a study by the American Bar Association, less than twenty percent of Americans are “extremely” or “very” confident in lawyers or the legal profession. Can we change these views about lawyers?

If lawyers are again to be seen as respected leaders who serve their clients and their communities, perhaps we should reexamine how we teach and prepare them for the profession. That is what we are doing at Elon.

Elon University School of Law is preparing men and women to embrace the role of lawyer as leader. From our founding, we embarked with an ambitious idea to improve legal education by incorporating into our program of study some of the best principles from leadership education and by expanding the real-life learning and service opportunities available for our students. In addition to their need to develop excellent skills in analysis and reasoning, we understand that future lawyers must also begin to form the ethical foundations and develop the leadership skills that will be required to confront the complex issues they inevitably will encounter in their personal lives, their careers, and in service to their communities. To help students achieve greater self-understanding and develop the skills and vision necessary to lead others, Elon University School of Law’s program includes leadership courses and sessions with practicing attorneys across all three years of law study.

Working with our faculty and several practicing lawyers in the introductory course, Lawyering, Leadership, and Professionalism, first-year students at Elon begin to learn more about themselves and how their personal values can and will shape their professional lives. In addition to meeting with practicing attorneys through the leadership course, every student is assigned a preceptor who serves as a mentor, coach, and advisor. In this course and the preceptor program, the faculty and the practicing attorneys model for our students the citizen-lawyer and the lawyer-leader through their own professional examples in teaching, scholarship, legal practice, and service. In these collaborative encounters with first-year students, these teachers and mentors inspire our students and help them begin to forge their own professional identities from the personal and ethical values that already are meaningful for them.

In the second-year course, Public Law and Leadership, Elon students learn to work together in teams to tackle actual legal problems for nonprofit organizations and government agencies in our area. In January, for example, student teams worked with the Center for Youth, Family and Community Partnerships to develop a consent process to facilitate inter-agency treatment for juveniles with substance-abuse problems. Other teams evaluated Greensboro’s policies and proposed measures to protect charitable investments in home repairs. Some teams with interests in environmental issues reviewed current ordinances for the Piedmont Conservation Council and proposed a farmland protection plan for Guilford County. Other teams evaluated several possible organizational structures for Greensboro’s University Roundtable, which aims to capitalize on the strengths of the local colleges and universities to improve our community. One second-year student, Keely Sewell, even spent part of her summer in an international leadership effort in Ethiopia, where she worked with that country’s First Federal Instance Court on an initiative to provide court-appointed social workers to represent the interests of children in family law cases.

In their third year, some students choose to participate in a Capstone Leadership course, which allows them to apply what they have learned about the law and leadership to a project that serves the profession or society. These projects take different forms. For example, Jeb Brooks organized a series of forums for the area’s young professionals. These forums focused on such topics such as the roles and responsibilities of local government and economic development in the region.

Students Stephen Shaw and Craig Turner, both veterans of leadership training in the armed services, assisted the faculty and administration in redesigning the first-year leadership course to tailor it more to meet the needs of entering law students. Laura Seel undertook a major project that examines the leadership and legal career of Justice Harry C. Martin, who served on the North Carolina Supreme Court and also was Chief Justice of the Cherokee Tribal Court. There are many other examples like these, where students see a need and move to fill it, which is the essence of leadership. We are confident many more will develop over time.

Elon Law recognizes that the lawyer’s first obligation may be to represent his client. Our program, however, stresses more, including the obligation for lawyers to serve their communities in ways that advance the commonweal. No other profession has given the world so varied an array of leaders who worked to improve their communities and societies: presidents, prime ministers, senators and representatives, judges, corporate heads, university leaders, community activists, church lay leaders, mayors, PTAs presidents, symphony and museum heads, you name it. We must sustain and strengthen that tradition. That is what Elon wants to do.

Of course, our modest efforts will not change the whole profession, or the public’s perception of lawyers – certainly not in the short term, but it is a useful start. From the moment they enroll at Elon University School of Law, our students will understand the expectation we have of them to be leaders. And when they become working lawyers – in private practice, as corporate counsel, in government or non-profit organizations – they will do so with great pride and commitment for their opportunities to serve.

To be sure, we face a world of unprecedented challenges. But those challenges provide enormous opportunities for principled, ethical leaders of integrity to make a difference. And lawyers should be – indeed we must be – among those principled, ethical leaders of integrity who strive to make a difference. So as the question, “Where have all the leaders gone?” is raised in the future, we want a common reply to be: “Many of them have gone to Elon.”

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