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Empirical Evidence of Competencies Necessary for Advancement in Law Firms

By Jerry Organ

For those trying to better understand how legal education can better prepare law students for the world that awaits them, I would encourage you to take a look at the draft article my colleague, Neil Hamilton, Director of the Holloran Center for Ethical Leadership in the Professions at the University of St. Thomas School of Law, recently posted on SSRN. The article is entitled Law-Firm Competency Models and Student Professional Success: Building on a Foundation of Professional Formation/Professionalism. Here is some of the description from the abstract:

A law student who understands legal employer competency models can differentiate him or herself from other graduates by using the three years of law school to develop (and to create supporting evidence to demonstrate) specific competencies beyond just knowledge of doctrinal law, legal analysis, and some written and oral communication skills. . . .

In Part I below, this essay analyzes all available empirical research on the values, virtues, capacities and skills in law firm competency models that define the competencies of the most effective and successful lawyers. Part II examines empirical evidence on the competencies that clients evaluate. Part III evaluates the competencies that make the most difference in fast-track associate and partnership promotions. These data and analyses lead to several bold propositions developed in Part IV:

1. Law students and legal educators should identify and understand the values, virtues, capacities and skills (the competencies) of highly effective and successful lawyers in different types of practice (one major example is law firm competency models analyzed below in Part I);
2. Each student should use all three years of experiences both inside and outside of law school (including the required and elective curriculum, extracurricular activities, and paid or pro bono work experiences) to develop and be able to demonstrate evidence of the competencies that legal employers and clients want in the student's area of employment interest;
3. Law schools should develop a competency-based curriculum that helps each student develop and be able to demonstrate the competencies that legal employers and clients want; and
4. Both law students and law schools should understand that the values, virtues, capacities and skills of professional formation (professionalism) are the foundation for excellence at all of the competencies of an effective and successful lawyer.

The article presents far more useful information than can be summarized here, and different readers may be struck by different things discussed in the article. One of the most significant takeaways for me, however, is the convergence around an array of competencies frequently not taught in law school. The article analyzes competency models used to assess associate development at 14 medium to large law firms in the Twin Cities and compares that with some other literature on competencies clients look for in attorneys. The analysis demonstrates that in addition to traditionally understood technical skills – legal analysis, oral and written communication, and knowledge of the law – there is significant convergence around several competencies frequently not taught in law school – 1) Ability to initiate and maintain strong work and team relationships; 2) Good judgment/common sense/problem-solving; 3) Business development/marketing/client retention; 4) Project management including high quality, efficiency, and timeliness; 5) Dedication to client service/responsive to client; and 6) Initiative/ambition/drive/strong work ethic.

Whether law schools are going to be able to find efficient ways to offer students opportunities to develop these competencies, it is imperative that we make our students aware that they need to be developing these competencies to give themselves the greatest likelihood of professional success.

Source: Empirical Evidence of Competencies Necessary for Advancement in Law Firms,
<http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/legalwhiteboard/2013/06/empirical-evidence-of-competencies-necessary-for-advancement-in-law-firms-1.html>, June 5, 2013