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John Osborn

University of San Francisco School of Law

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How I Found Jobs for My Students: One Professor's Story

John Osborn*

Six years ago, for the first time, I taught a course called “Estate Planning.” It grew out of my Wills and Trusts course and was designed for students who were interested in entering the field. The idea was to teach them how to draft the most common documents created by estate planners, and how to modify those documents to suit the needs of individual clients.

I had no idea if any student would be interested in this course. My law school emphasizes “educating for justice,” as well as litigation. It turned out that, in fact, quite a few students did want to take the course, about fifteen, if my memory serves. It also turned out that they were amazingly dedicated, taking tremendous care with their documents and generating huge numbers of pages for me to read.

About a month into the course, several of the students asked to meet with me to discuss how they might actually find jobs in the estate planning field. They said that they had been to the Office of Career Planning, but that it did not have a list of graduates of our law school who were practicing estate planning. They wanted to know if I could introduce them to practitioners.

I wondered why the Office of Career Planning did not have a list of graduates in the estate planning field who might provide leads for jobs for our students. So, I visited the office. As during any era of constricting job opportunities, they were overwhelmed with student demand. Their focus was much broader than what we had in mind. They held large “mixers,” which a variety of lawyer-types attended.

As it happened, my little group of potential estate planners consisted of five students. As we discussed these issues, someone came up with the idea of forming a student group dedicated to estate planning—if we were not going to get help from the Career Development Office, perhaps the answer was to form our own interest group. It seemed like a good idea to us, but whether there would be any wider interest was an open question. Despite the unknowns, everyone was excited and full of ideas. We would have panels of speakers, parties of practitioners and students, and an advisory panel to connect our group with the outside world of estate planning. We would bring the field of estate planning into the heart of the law school!

* John J. Osborn Jr. is currently a Professor of Law at the University of San Francisco School of Law. Osborn is the author of several novels including *The Paper Chase*, *The Associates*, and *The Man Who Owned New York*. His articles, stories, book reviews and essays have appeared in *New York University Law Review*, *The Cardozo Journal of Law and Literature*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *California Lawyer*, and many other publications. Osborn has written television scripts for 20th Century Fox, Paramount Studios, Warner Brothers, Viacom/Showtime, and many other entertainment companies. Movies and television series based on his books, and on which he worked, have won numerous awards. Professor Osborn earned a B.A. from Harvard University and a J.D. from Harvard School of Law.

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At our law school, student groups are approved by the Dean of Students and funded by the Student Bar Association (SBA). The SBA hands money out from funds given by the school. We were starting out the group in the middle of the semester, and most of the SBA money already had been given out. Apparently, there was going to be no money for our fledgling group, which would make it hard to put on any events.

Just when we were unsure what to do next, we were approached by the law school's Development Office. It is the fundraising arm of the law school. I had known that they existed, of course, but I had never actually been in their office or met any of the people involved with development.

It turned out that the Development Office was also interested in graduates who were in the estate planning field. Like our little group, they were interested in compiling a list. Would we be interested in joining them in making such a list? Moreover, the Development Office was interested in our ideas of promoting events at the law school that involved estate planners.

The idea that our new "Estate Planning Society," or "EPS" as we named it, would form an alliance with the Development Office made us wary. We were worried that the estate planners we contacted would become targets of the Development Office in that the Development Office would try to solicit funds from them. It seemed as if we would be crossing some moral bright line. We had never heard of any student group working with the Development Office before.

On the other hand, we were impressed with how professional they were. They knew much more about the alumni than the Office of Career Planning seemed to. Moreover, they had ideas of their own. They thought that I, as the faculty advisor to EPS, ought to get to know some of the more prominent graduates who were in the estate planning field. If I was willing, the Development Office would set up the lunches and a member of their team would attend with me.

As we discussed all of this, I learned that they did not "buttonhole" alumni and put pressure on them. Fundraising was, apparently, a long-term proposition. The idea was to bring the alumni within the orbit of the law school, and let matters take their natural course from there. Estate planners, I came to understand, were particularly interesting to the Development Office since they understood the tax advantages of charitable giving. If they came within the orbit of the Development Office, they might remember to advise their fellow graduates about how a gift to the law school might not only be spiritually rewarding but financially beneficial as well.

I momentarily had second thoughts about all of this, as I saw that it would involve a lot of my time. My conception of a faculty advisor to a student group was that the students did the work, and I helped out if they got into a jam. The Development Office was suggesting a much more involved commitment.

All of this was going on while my law school was in a period of encouraging faculty to write more. Those who produced articles were being rewarded

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financially and with reduced teaching loads. The idea, I suppose, was that the law review articles produced by our faculty would increase our reputation, and perhaps our standing in the law school rankings.

The fledgling Estate Planning Society was taking me in a *different* direction, out into the field where our graduates were trying to make a living.

We decided that working with the Development Office was worth trying, and so the lunches began. Meanwhile, the student members worked on developing a master list of graduates in the estate planning field, consulting the usual sources such as the Bar Association and publications like Martindale Hubble.

And the students were finding amazing people. It turned out there were a great many successful estate planning attorneys who were graduates of our law school. Our law school, which was focused on other areas, such as litigation, had overlooked them.

Within a month or so, we felt ready to have our first event, which consisted of a panel discussion with three graduates who were practicing in the estate planning field. With the Development Office providing the funds, we were able to cater it. And, with the unbelievably enthusiastic members of the Estate Planning Society stuffing the mailboxes of every single student with a flyer that advertised possible jobs and the excellent food, we had a crowd that filled the room.

In the spring, one lawyer I had met through the lunches arranged by the Development Office volunteered to let EPS use her beautiful law firm library and stunning fortieth floor patio at the Embarcadero Center in San Francisco to put on a cocktail party. It was an amazing event, with our student members all dressed up and mingling with our graduates—everyone talking about estate planning!

Aside from getting law students interested in a field they might not have considered, there was an important practical result from these efforts. Students actually got jobs. Most estate planning in San Francisco is done in small firms of just a few lawyers. When one of these firms needs to hire an associate, it rarely goes through the Career Planning Office of a law school. Instead, it uses an informal network to find out about prospects. The Estate Planning Society put us into that network.

In 2013, we had a panel discussion given by three young estate planners. They talked about how they had found jobs and what their current practices were like. It was a significant event since all three of the young estate planners had been founders of the Estate Planning Society five years before. Now, they were out in the field actually practicing. Now *they* were in a position to hire law students. In essence, the Estate Planning Society had come full circle.

A few months later, a lawyer, a graduate of our law school, called me. I had met her through my outreach to the legal community on behalf of the Estate Planning Society. She had an opening for a young attorney. Did I personally, or did the Estate Planning Society, have any graduating students to recommend?

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This particular lawyer had been practicing in the Estate Planning field since she had graduated twenty years before. She had had no contact with the law school, until the EPS asked her to serve on a panel discussion. Now she was an advisor to the Estate Planning Society. Of course we had graduates to recommend, and one is now working in her office.

Here, writ small, is the result of all our efforts: an alumnus who had been out of contact had re-engaged with our law school and was now providing a job in a field that had been ignored by the law school for years. In recent years, some law schools have promoted a culture of ivory tower scholarship which discourages engagement with the profession. Maybe we need to re-think this trend.