

Past Imperfect

Personal Statements Can Renew Motivation, Improve Learning

Students submit as part of their law school application a personal statement that explores life-changing events, describes the influence of key people, and explains why the applicant wants to become a lawyer. With the admission decision hanging in the balance, applicants craft their words very carefully. Indeed, the essay represents many hours of self-study, subsequently revealing priorities and personal goals. Yet for all of its potential value toward sustaining academic discipline and improving legal pedagogy, it is used by the admissions committee principally to verify writing ability and to promote diversity in the entering class. Having served its purpose, it is filed away.

Revisited effectively by the law teacher, a student's personal statement can be an excellent motivational tool and a powerful

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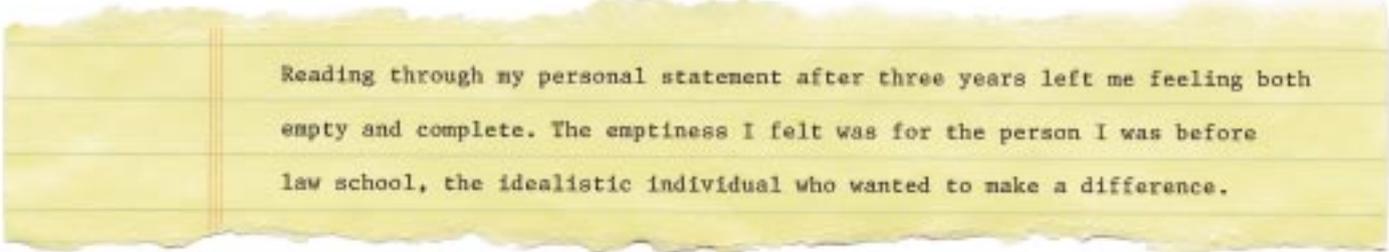
and- and third-year law students, often appearing jaded and cynical, to reclaim the initial excitement they felt for legal study. Where is a match to reignite “fire in the belly”?

On the first day of class, I ask students what factors contribute to the optimal learning experience. Students are quick to cite natural intelligence as a key factor, but they soon add that discipline and motivation are just as important. Being smart is a big plus, they say, but no more so than the will to excel and good study habits. Pressing on, I ask whether there was a time when they were convinced that becoming lawyers mattered so much that they were prepared to give unrelent-

race and gender relations, to stop the shaming of the poor and outcast, to lend an ear to the unpopular voice.

I then jolt them by announcing that I will distribute to them a copy of their personal statement and that the first paper assignment is to write an updated personal statement. They are to carefully examine the discrepancy between how they imagined law school would deal with their ideals and what, in fact, law school has done in that regard. As they critically reflect on written promises they made to themselves, will the person they once were recognize the person they have become? Why have they gone back on their word—and at what price?

[T]he applicant I once was would recognize me because she was hopeful and good. Conversely, I no longer recognize the applicant's positive [outlook], idealism, and hope for change. Perhaps this is merely the result of maturation. . . . [T]he legal educational process does engender cynicism, disillusionment, the baseness of human nature, and intellectual and emotional exhaustion from constantly conforming to the status quo.



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educational resource. In the former capacity, it keeps the student mindful of original ideals; in the latter role, it prompts the law teacher to turn diverse life backgrounds into a new source of instructional material.

Reading through my personal statement for the first time [in three years] left me feeling both empty and complete. The emptiness I felt was for the person I was before law school, the idealistic individual who wanted to make a difference. . . . Looking back, my first reflection was that law school robs or strips people of these goals. The whole first year of law school I felt beat down, confused, and lost.

You have probably wondered, as I have, what more we can do to help sec-

ing commitment to legal education. As they ponder that question, I tell them the answer is “yes” and that I can prove it *in their own words*.

Puzzled looks turn to surprise and then sheepishness as I inform the class that I have reviewed each of their personal statements and have with me a copy of their essays. I read excerpts, many of which speak eloquently to the denial of justice and the need to press forward in the struggle for equality. I recite from their papers the pervasive theme that the study of law will benefit not only themselves but their “people,” their family and friends. I remind them of the zeal they once had to make a positive difference in

Students report that engaging in this introspective exercise is so unexpected and strange that they do not know how to proceed initially. They tell me that they feel disoriented, as though pulled away from a myopic focus on legal rules to once again behold a broad social vision. Taking this sobering look at where they are in light of where they thought they would be, most students discover that they would apply themselves eagerly to academics if deeply felt convictions instead of mere concepts were at stake. They would study harder and take classes more seriously if law school instruction were tied to something more important than a final course grade.

In some ways my personal statement . . . show[ed] my strong idealistic convictions. . . . I assumed that such aspirations were worthy and valuable to the law school community. "Not so!" said my first year of law school. "The only worthy aspiration for a law student is top-10 grades, law review, and an important and lucrative job with a large firm." I suppose I was and am a little disillusioned with the law school culture.

I have felt a tugging between my intrinsic convictions of wanting to really make a difference and the use of [legal] knowledge to help people, with the more selfish extrinsic conventions of what "success" really is. I don't understand at this point what I want. I don't understand where I fit in and where I will be satisfied with my personal aspirations. . . . My first year tended to tear me down in many ways.

At this point, revisiting the personal statement becomes a double-edged sword. Once students are challenged to summon and strengthen their heartfelt resolve to become excellent attorneys, the attention shifts to the law teacher. Is the professor prepared to take full educational advantage of students' profound and diverse reasons to excel? Will the instructor do what is necessary to sustain motivation, reforming law school pedagogy to affirm and integrate the beautifully worded aspirations recorded in the personal statement?

This brings us to the second day of class and the use of the personal statements as an educational resource. Students arrive with their newly revised personal statements in hand. The mood swing from the first hour is dramatic. With the instructor looking into their faces, it is as though their first-day expressions—pensive at best, withdrawn at worst—are now alert and bright, as though a new source of light were shining upon them. Students use other similes, such as "It feels like a tightly shut window has been pried open and a fresh breeze has blown in, reinvigorating parts of [me] that had fallen asleep."

[O]ne year of law school has actually made me feel less confident, . . . push[ing] my deepest emotions toward discouragement, fear, and intimidation. . . . But when I ponder the many other people (particularly family) who are counting on me, . . . I persist and work harder. My life has become a pattern or example for

my younger siblings and other [minority] children in the community. . . . My personal statement stands as it is and as it was written.

I inform the class that we will engage in an exercise with their updated personal statements that makes plain the limitations of conventional legal study, sheds light on additional problem-solving skills that are otherwise neglected, and sets into motion an instructional pattern that will improve learning relationships among them. In other words, I broaden the purpose of their critical reflection, saying that they revisited their personal statements not only to reinvigorate motivation but moreover to set the stage for our learning adventure together.

I begin the exercise by asking students to list the problem-solving skills that law school training is sharpening. They note such "left-brained" abilities as analytically dissecting facts, spotting relevant legal issues, selecting and applying legal rules, logically arguing over the relative merits of a legal position in light of the facts, advocating policy considerations, and so on. I then ask whether there has been similar development of other, "right-brained" methods of processing disputes, especially those relying on intuitive, creative, empathic, relational, and spiritual strengths.

In revisiting my personal statement, I am amazed at how optimistic I was about what I could do with my law degree and how I could "make a positive difference." . . . As for my first year of law school, . . . I was exposed to a "How can I help me and me only?" type of world rather than the "How can I learn to help myself and others?" type of world that I was expecting. To put it mildly, this stunned me.

I ask students to consider whether the diverse aspirations recorded in their personal statements, especially healing social divisions, could be attained using only logical/intellectual aptitude. Invariably, they realize that to meet the career goals set forth in their personal statements, they will need to expand traditional law school problem solving (i.e., theoretical expertise and rights-based advocacy) with far better training in critical reflection, active listening, mediation, goal setting, coalition building, delegation, supervision, accountability, evaluation, and other interactive skills to manage group conflict.

[T]hose who are the most respected, and consequently can do the most good, are not separated but [rather] connected to everyone else. I need to remember to reach for great heights while at the same time not just visiting those [people] below. I must be with them and take them with me to higher levels. . . . The simple reading of my personal statement has helped return me to my prior course. . . . I am excited about the chance to continue to do some introspection to make those necessary adjustments in my course to allow me to be an influential lawyer and to become a better person.

I challenge students to remain true to their newfound resolve. Specifically, I ask them to consider preparing a videotape at the end of the term that responds to the following questions: If they were chosen to address the entire law school community, what would they say regarding the law school curriculum and educational process? Would they be able to say that they were in danger of losing their connection to their deepest concerns but then recovered, redeeming their ties to ancestry, family, gender, race, economic class, nationality, and other loyalties? Would they look back and take pride in reclaiming aspirations expressed in their revised personal statements?

The personal statement exercise jump-starts a semester-long commitment to integrate student ideals into the learning enterprise. We have added other interactive experiences such as interviews, team assignments, videotaped negotiations, teaching on campus and in the community, and other forms of fieldwork.

Last fall semester I asked students whether they would favor a law school campaign to persuade faculty members and fellow students of the motivational and educational value of the personal statement. In light of our just-completed exercise with their own essays, they could see how our first week turned typical classroom relations into the beginnings of a healthy, integrated community. Most of the 19 students voted to be part of the larger campaign. Hence, we are now exploring ways to extend the personal statement exercise to those outside our classroom and hope to model a compelling vision of the optimal law school learning process.