

THE *STUDENT-FACULTY* RETREAT

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I roamed around the law school atrium feeling rather queasy. The entire 1-L class had gathered at the faculty's "invitation." It was 8:30 am. It was Saturday. The students did not look happy.

They were here for our first ever law school student-faculty retreat. Sure, almost every faculty member has by now experienced the faculty retreat. But a retreat with students? On a Saturday? Required? What were we thinking?

This somewhat risky experiment came out of some faculty thinking about our mission. Two years ago in this symposium, I shared a bit about Regent's mission to: (1) integrate Christian principles into the substance of the law we teach; and (2) train and mentor students to bring a Christian perspective to bear on the way they live and practice law. I described then the training we had as a faculty in the historic integration of faith and law to prepare us to better fulfill the mission's first substantive prong.

It was focus on the second prong—preparing students to practice their faith while practicing law—that led to this retreat. We find it hard during a traditional law school course to give a great deal of attention to the difficult issues of living out one's faith in a profession that demands enormous time and energy and frequently presents ethical dilemmas that test that faith. Plus, the class discussion can tend toward the philosophical and academic. But in real life, the issues that arise are usually personal and highly practical. So it dawned on us to take a day away from the casebooks to focus very practically on living out one's faith in the profession.

Despite the tentative beginning, the day turned out to be a real success. First, we accomplished what we had intended. We dialogued with students about the notion of calling and the idea that participation in the legal profession could be more than just holding down a (hopefully) well-paying job. We also discussed head-on what it means to be a "Christian lawyer" anyway. Is there such a thing? Is the term an oxymoron? Is one's faith a Sunday faith to be set aside during the realities and pressures of a practice that can often consume one's whole life?

But there was more. It wasn't just the consideration of these issues that was so important. It was that we did it together—faculty and students grappling together about things that really matter, that go to the heart of who we are as a school. It was a day that truly deepened relationships between students and faculty.

It deepened relationships among the students themselves, too. Part of the exercise saw students serving others. The SBA members agreed to arrange all of the food for the day. They were there bright and early to serve muffins and coffee and were there to clean up at the end. Through the day they got to meet—and serve—their newest classmates.

Perhaps the greatest benefit was one I hadn't predicted. The day served to restore a sense of vision and focus to the class. I imagine Regent is not alone in

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experiencing this phenomenon. In their admission essays, students are optimistic and idealistic. They talk of their desire to pursue justice, which caused them to consider law in the first place. But after four weeks of an endless stream of cases and seemingly no concrete answers—only competing interests and arguments—they are already jaded. Justice seems nowhere to be found. There is only law and legalisms.

Fortuitously we held that first retreat just when students had reached that point. One of the sessions was an open-microphone session where (and admittedly this was a high-risk move!) students could react to the things we had discussed during the day or share thoughts more generally about their law school experience. It was amazing how many came to the microphone to share how the day had restored their vision and focus. Others shared struggles of the first year that they had assumed they had experienced alone. And they were immediately surrounded by classmates who supported them and shared their own joys and frustrations.

I really believe the day cemented lasting relationships. Heading home on that first Saturday, I felt a combination of (I admit it) relief and real joy

As a faculty, we learned a lot from that first experiment. We have developed a formula that seems to work best. We now hold two student-faculty retreats a year. Both are for half a day only. While we ended that first retreat with an enjoyable late afternoon picnic for families, the time commitment was too great. We now end with a community lunch. The fall retreat—always held at the “jading point”—is for 1-Ls only, with the focus on calling and the practical meaning of the term “Christian lawyer.” The spring retreat is for all students and faculty. And here the topics vary while always focusing on some *very* practical issues relating to the practice of law. These have included: How to handle finances, both personal (especially important for students leaving with significant debt) and professional (handling client trust accounts); how to display character traits of humility and integrity (with lots of concrete ethical dilemmas from discovery disputes and client relations); the most difficult litigation ethical dilemmas for a new lawyer; and effective time management.

After stumbling upon the open-mike session, we always include a time for open student sharing. Each time we do it, this session takes a different turn. But each time it is deeply gratifying—and often moving.

I imagine that some readers will conclude that such a retreat could really only work at a school with a mission like Regent’s. And I have no doubt that the common faith commitment of many of our students contributes greatly to the bonding that takes place on this day—and even on the willingness to participate.

But I am convinced that—in the midst of the rigors and ambiguities of law school—students everywhere can experience a loss of vision and perspective. They forget why they started training for the profession in the first place and become extremely discouraged. I remember the phenomenon well when I was a student. A half-day to clear one’s head and restore focus on the big picture and ultimate goal can be refreshing and vital. Such a day also serves to bring faculty and students together in a way that no faculty “open door” policy can. It is really a community day. Despite my fears that first Saturday morning, I highly recommend the student-faculty retreat as an experiment well worth trying.