

A little competition isn't bad



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One of the reasons that my friends and family were surprised by my decision to go to law school is that I am not a very competitive person. I have always preferred having people get along rather than try to win, if winning drives them apart. Growing up, I often took the role of mediator between my debating siblings.

I never enjoyed anything that was really competitive. I am not implying that all law students or lawyers are competitive people, but there is no doubt that the legal field is competitive.

I didn't give much thought to the competitiveness of law school until the few months leading up to it. That's when I started feeling concerned by stories I heard of students hiding books in the library or refusing to share their notes — all to do better than the other students.

I hoped that the stories of competitiveness were just exaggerations.

At my school's orientation, I heard about the tight grading curve during the first year and how, after each semester, we would be individually ranked by our grade point averages.

By this point, I already made friends with some of my future classmates and I did not like the idea of competing with them for better grades and a better rank. Once the semester was under way, I formed study groups with several classmates. It really felt like we were a team, working together and even socializing together.

It didn't take long for things to change, though. Soon the study groups turned into debate club, with everyone trying to talk over one another and everyone arguing over who was right.

Some classmates would set up meetings

with professors and the other classmates would feel betrayed that they were left out of the meetings. And when we received grades for our first midterm exams, some of my classmates wondered why they earned lower grades than their fellow study-mates, which caused some tension. Everyone wanted to do well during their first semester of law school, but we didn't know how to handle the fact that not everybody would do well. After the first semester's grades were posted, everyone was talking about everyone else's grades and trying to figure out how they compared to their own grades. For a short period, the whole student body seemed consumed with grades and ranks.

After the second semester, the competitiveness seemed to peak. Some of my classmates were placed on law review and other journals and some of my classmates were not. Some of my classmates withdrew from law school completely.

At the same time, everyone started their summer internships. Some students found great internships, others found less than great internships and others did not find an internship at all.

For one of the first times in my life, I started to feel competitive. I couldn't help but compare myself to my peers. I did not wish for any of my friends to do poorly, but I knew someone had to rank lowest and I wanted to make sure that person was not me. Everything that I heard about law school seemed to be coming true. I felt as though the competitiveness of law school brought out the worst in my peers and me.

Fortunately, my memories of kindness and camaraderie trump my memories of competitiveness.

When I missed class because I was sick, sev-

eral of my peers e-mailed their class notes to me without me even asking. When one of my classmates had a rough day of playing "hide the ball" with a professor, we took him out for drinks after class. Many of my classmates patiently took the time to explain complicated concepts to the rest of us in the study groups.

As my graduation approaches and I reflect back on my time in law school, I realize how much support my peers gave me through these last three years.

I have been able to call classmates late at night to ask them to review the hearsay exceptions or to just help me de-stress — both with equal effectiveness. I made lifelong friends with whom I know I will remain in contact long after law school. Whenever they find a great internship or make straight As, I genuinely feel happy for them. By third year, the curve is a lot less strict and most of my peers are following different tracks than me. And I have never heard of anyone actually hiding books in the library.

I also realized that a little competition is not that bad. If law schools were not competitive, we would swamp an already-crowded marketplace.

Plus, the competitiveness of law school contributes to the students' drive to be better lawyers.

Because I had to compete to do well in law school, I am more confident in my abilities to be a lawyer. I did not just compete against my peers but also against myself. Whenever I fell, I felt even more motivated to get up and do a better job. I still act as the mediator whenever my siblings get into a debate. And lucky for me, there are many places in the legal field for good mediators. ■

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