Which Practice-Ready Courses Should You Take?

By Amy L. Jarmon, Student Lawyer, March 2015

Legal research and writing courses. Lawyers must depend on their competencies in research and writing every day. Whether they become solo practitioners who do their own research, law librarians who research for other lawyers, or new associates in large firms, graduates will regularly complete research to solve legal problems. They will continually be asked to present their findings in legal documents that provide clients, other lawyers, and judges with concise and accurate summaries of the law and arguments on behalf of clients. Courses such as advanced legal research, state-specific research, and statutory analysis will prepare them for these daily tasks. Law schools also provide opportunities through various journals and independent research credits to improve student research and writing. No future lawyer can have too much experience in research and writing before graduating.

In signing up for these practice-ready opportunities, students need to keep in mind several things to be truly successful:

- Practice-ready courses can seem less demanding than substantive courses because the grade is not dependent on one all-encompassing final exam. Students need to realize that the learning in these courses often builds each week with every new topic studied. Unlike a substantive course that the student may try to cram for at the end, lack of focus and understanding in these courses cannot be suddenly remedied. Diligence is needed throughout the semester for the cumulative work required on a client file, research project, or drafted business plan. These courses demand excellent work products reflecting lawyerly standards of professionalism and competence.

- Multiple grades for a myriad of assignments may cause some students to discount the importance of a smaller work product that is only 5 or 10 percent of the grade. Yet each smaller assignment is invaluable in the student’s overall work product because small tasks integrate into the larger whole and contribute to the skills learned. For example, one faulty research step can undermine the final legal analysis for a client file. A misplaced comma in one drafted section of a document can mean later confusion and subsequent litigation.

- Some students merely skim or totally ignore reading assignments in these courses because they seem simplistic or common sense. Yet the practical tips and cautionary examples in these types of practice-ready materials often relay the exact information that can prevent lawyers from later faltering in their practice decisions, losing important clients, or having state bar disciplinary actions. It is often the small details and daily nuances of legal practice that are essential to success.

- Employers are impressed by grades in substantive courses. However, they know that any lawyer should be able to learn a new area of law. Practice-ready courses ensure employers that those graduates are prepared with the daily lawyering skills that a legal employer needs.