

Preface (Or, the “Party” of the First Part)

In the late fall of 1984, towards the end of our first semester as Harvard Law School students, several classmates and I signed up to have lunch with one of our section’s professors.

During that meal, he asked us, with what seemed to be genuine concern, whether we were feeling stressed, either in his course or generally. We all looked at each other; we all told him that we were just fine.

He was certainly too intelligent, and experienced, to believe us. Looking somewhat befuddled, he peered at us over his glasses and wondered, “Honestly, I don’t know why you all don’t treat law school as a three-year party.”

My classmates and I looked at each other again. Somehow, we all managed to keep straight faces, but this time none of us had a ready answer for him.

Almost four decades—and numerous technological, cultural, political, social, and economic changes—after that lunch, it seems even less appropriate to compare law school to an extended party.

In fact, like the novel on which it was based (and like the television show which would follow in 1978), the 1973 movie *The Paper Chase* focused on the intense commitment, concentration, and hermetic (if not hermitic) existence of law students. Actor John Houseman’s fictional Professor Kingsfield imperiously intoned, “You come in here with a skull full of mush, and you leave thinking like a lawyer.”

Similarly intimidating is a book that a well-meaning relative gave me the summer before I started law school: *One L*, Scott Turow’s account of his first-year experience at Harvard in 1975–76. (I found it so unnerving that I put it away after only a few chapters, and completed it ten months later, while returning home after final exams.)

During that summer, I scoured libraries and bookstores for any guide to this new environment, but came up with little that seemed useful, insightful, practical, or even particularly encouraging. (On an early visit to the campus, I’d asked an especially prominent professor, after one of his class sessions ended, whether he had any advice for a newly admitted law student: he’d answered, “I’m very tired now. Why don’t you see me in the fall?”)

The book that you are now reading contains my version of the information that I so nervously searched for in the spring and summer of 1984. It organizes and distills more than 25 years of advice that I’ve given to, and heard from, prospective students, students, and alumni as a member of the faculty of the

American University Washington College of Law (WCL); and, before that, as an adjunct faculty member at Seton Hall Law School.

These chapters also include lessons I that learned as a law student at Harvard, as a judicial clerk for the Supreme Court of New Jersey, and as an associate at two of New Jersey’s largest law firms, Roseland’s Lowenstein Sandler and Newark’s McCarter & English. (There are no “composite characters,” but in some cases personal details have been modified to protect the privacy of individuals.)

All the views expressed are my own and are not official statements or positions of any of these institutions. I have no financial interest in any of the books that I recommend, except for my own book on corporate governance; and I don’t necessarily agree with every view expressed in them.

The material is arranged in roughly the order in which you might find it of use during your law school career. However, you might want to browse through the entire book before your first day of classes.

This is a book of “you might” and “you could,” and even, “you should”; but never, “you must.”

Rather than attempting to offer a complete, definitive, or one-size-fits-all guide to law school, *Keeping Your Own Counsel* suggests—and, in its eight appendices, provides further details and examples of—some simple and supportive strategies, systems, schedules, and structures, many of which you might not see or hear elsewhere, for engaging with and enriching your law school journey.

The title refers not only to the chapters’ recommendations and reasons for constructing specific types of lists, but also to their emphasis on preparing a portable professional portfolio to maximize your career opportunities.

I hope that this book will help you navigate from acclimation to acclamation, and that it will make your law school experience, if not quite a three-year party, as productive, fulfilling, manageable, and meaningful—and as enjoyable—as it can be.

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