Cliff Jumping: Why the reward is worth the risk

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Given the bad press that law schools have received over the past year, a common question and assumption are, “Why would a student attend a school not accredited by the ABA? It must be because he or she is not able to get into a ‘real’ law school.”

There is a corollary to that statement in terms of administrators, faculty, and librarians. Sometimes these individuals are perceived as “not good enough” to make it in a “real” law school; thus, they took the only job they could find.

But, just as students have their own reasons for choosing a particular law school (accredited or not), we had our choice of law schools, and we chose to work for Lincoln Memorial University Duncan School of Law (DSOL) in Knoxville, Tennessee, a new law school accredited by the Tennessee Board of Law Examiners that is actively seeking ABA accreditation.

We would like to take this opportunity to share what it is like to work at a school seeking ABA accreditation—and why we feel it’s a risk worth taking.

The Pros
The best part of working at DSOL is the chance to create—we are helping to build an institution from day one on the job. This is an act of creation; how often in our careers do we have a chance to make something out of nothing? Before the law librarians arrived at DSOL, there were no reference policies, technical services workflows, faculty liaison programs, or student research assistants—in other words, no institutional memory.

Each of DSOL’s librarians arrived with a vision for his or her niche and was encouraged to bring that vision to fruition. Because the law school is new, we are able to expand our skills beyond our job titles and experiment with the facets of librarianship and administration that interest us. Our director, Gordon Russell, has championed the move toward a predominantly digital library collection, and that policy was the first to be adopted by our law school. When Jordan accepted the student services librarian position, her job description simply stated that she would be a liaison to the students. In carrying out that responsibility, she has not only created student programs and generated student interest in the library, but she has taken the opportunity to engage in marketing the library and the law school. Likewise, Katherine has found that in addition to her responsibilities as information and faculty services librarian, which include teaching, supervising faculty research assistants, and otherwise aiding faculty, she has an interest in the evolving field of library and institutional assessment.

At DSOL, she is allowed to pursue that interest to the fullest, as the school aims to be a model for law school assessment. Working at a new, non-ABA-accredited institution allows us to use a short-term trial-and-error approach (and correct it as often as necessary) to solve problems instead of fighting entrenched attitudes about “how things should be.” We are lucky in that we have the ability to design policy, to try (and fail), and to learn from our successes and mistakes.

Another great benefit of working at a new law school is the chance to meet interesting people.

The faculty and librarians working at new law schools have all taken the same leap—each has decided to try his or her
that suggests that a person’s powers of persuasion are dulled by e-books. But on March 14, 2012, an article in TIME Magazine, “Do E-Books Make It Harder to Remember What You Just Read?” reported that people are less likely to remember information read on e-readers than information read on paper.

Part of this recall deficit can be explained by the fact that smaller screens hinder recall. The smaller the screen, the bigger the recall deficit is. Therefore, cell phones are notoriously difficult for our memories. Larger screens, such as iPad screens, are better for memory but not as good as a print book.

The other contributor to this memory gap is that a larger number of readings are required to learn information presented by e-book than are required by print because print readers digest information more deeply and more quickly. The reason for this appears to be that it is easier to remember things when we can form a greater number of associations with the text. Print books provide a wealth of spatial associations with information. Things that might seem irrelevant, such as whether something is written at the top or bottom of a page or on the right- or left-hand side, are actually important in recall. Most e-books provide little in the way of spatial associations. Many screen texts require scrolling instead of definite page breaks, and early Kindles do not have pages at all but provide a measure of the percentage of the book read.

In case there is continued skepticism that spatial associations have anything to do with recall, consider “What Actors Can Teach Us About Memory and Learning,” an article in TIME from February 22, 2012. The article points out that actors require incredible powers of memorization. They must reproduce long scripts under bright lights and in front of an audience, night after night. Just imagine learning long Shakespeare soliloquies by heart! What is the actors’ secret that we should steal to master our own lists and speeches? Actors don’t memorize anything in the traditional sense. Instead, they connect each word with an action in the play and a location onstage. These movements are carefully designed during rehearsal, and they form a bodily mnemonic device of spatial associations.

Careful Decision Making

Does this mean that I will not be buying e-books for my own library? The answer, as always, is that it depends. I have ordered electronic texts for my law library in the past. So far, I have never ordered an e-book for my law library, but that may change in the future. The advantages of remote access, space savings, and technological image sometimes overcome the disadvantages of speed, stress, and recall. The point is to carefully weigh the pros and cons using all the facts. Those pros and cons just have different weights for professional literature than they do for my Kindle phase of the latest population explosion.

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Creating Something Special

The reasons that led us to DSOL are as individual as we are, but ultimately, we decided to assume the risk and plunge ahead with this exciting, frustrating, maddening, exhilarating endeavor. Succeed or fail, we know that we took a chance and are helping to create something special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more special. Because we believe, in the words of Bruce Lee, that “Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more

The Cons

Ray Bradbury once said: “Living at risk is jumping off the cliff and building your wings on the way down.” If the process of creation is the process of building your wings, the willingness to seek employment at a new law school is the process of jumping off the cliff. (Although, some people live to jump off cliffs and out of airplanes—to each his own.) We would like to address a few aspects of the jump.

There is a stigma attached to working for a new school that is not accredited by the ABA: that you aren’t good enough to work at a real law school, and you never will be. Sometimes this means that the professionals you meet at conferences will initially discount your contributions. The challenge is to prove them wrong.

It can be disheartening to put so much time and effort into an endeavor only to have your institution and your job disparaged. It is a constant battle to justify the choice to work at a start-up school, to continuously prove that we are just as good at our jobs as others who work at established, accredited law schools. But we are proud of our school, our students, and the work we do, which makes the extra effort worthwhile.

And, of course, there is the risk that comes with accepting a job at a start-up school seeking ABA accreditation. In these challenging economic times, the No. 1 question is that of stability. We are not immune to anxieties about the current climate. Will we be employed next year? What if we do not receive accreditation from the ABA? What will happen to our law school and all of the programs we worked so hard to create? What will happen to our students and colleagues? These, of course, are always concerns, and they are never far from our minds. However, both of us have learned to live with the uncertainty and to keep calm and carry on, because we believe the reward is worth the risk.

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