

Law School Exams

Law School Exams

A Guide to Better Grades

Alex Schimel

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Foreword

Joanne Harvest Koren

When I started the Academic Achievement Program (AAP) at the University of Miami School of Law in 1994, I knew I wanted to design the Law School's "pilot" academic support program as one that uses upper level law students as Dean's Fellows (or "teaching assistants"). I thought that if I could find 12 upper level students who were willing to do just as I thought and said, we could design and implement a successful academic support program to serve the needs of our 1L students.

I soon learned how naïve I was in my thinking. After hiring 12 intelligent, dynamic, clever and creative students as Dean's Fellows, I quickly realized they often had different ideas about how things should be taught, planned and done. Happily, I also quickly discovered that this was a very good thing, and I was willing and enthusiastic about incorporating those students' ideas into my own plans. As the program has grown and developed I have depended on the student Dean's Fellows to help me create and shape that initial vision into the successful program it is today.

In the more than sixteen years since I created the program, I have been extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to hire, train, supervise, work with and get to know hundreds of successful law students who choose to spend a great deal of their 2L and 3L years working with me in the Academic Achievement Program. Among those hundreds of outstanding students, Alex Schimel stands out. He is a remarkably intelligent and creative young man who has innovative ideas and a talent for teaching. In

addition, he has the unique ability to make his clever ideas and methods of teaching and learning seem quite straightforward and sensible.

I first met Alex when he was a 1L student. He sent me an email thanking me for presenting a “1L Boot Camp” program at the beginning of the year, which he found very helpful. I invited Alex to come to my office so we could discuss the program. Even as a 1L student, in the second week of class, Alex was insightful, thoughtful and analytical and saw things with a clear and discerning eye. It did not surprise me to learn Alex finished his first year of law school at the top of his class.

In the fall of his second year of law school, Alex began working with me as a Writing Dean’s Fellow in the Academic Achievement Program Writing Center. We spent many visits talking about student learning, teaching, exam writing and law school in general. He had observed and participated in the process of “law school learning” and had well-developed and interesting ideas. Although (and perhaps because) Alex’s ideas sometimes differed from mine, I thoroughly appreciated his insight and vantage point. I was delighted when Alex offered to assume the role of Dean’s Fellow for the Academic Achievement Program’s Spring Exam Workshop series. In that role he would have the opportunity to work with fellow students who were trying to find ways to improve their academic experience and acclimate to law study. The weekly AAP Exam Workshop sessions are voluntary, but students are asked to commit to the eight weekly sessions.

In discussing the planning of those sessions with Alex, it became quite evident that he had a theory and program model for exam-taking success. Hundreds of students flocked to the voluntary weekly Exam Workshop sessions Alex taught. Sometimes there was “standing room only” in the classroom. Word got out around the law school and in the two years Alex taught the Exam Workshop, several hundred students benefited from insight into Alex’s law school and exam-taking advice. Alex’s advice has become somewhat institutionalized here. In fact, around the University of Miami School of Law, current Dean’s Fellows and stu-

dents call Alex's "IRAHNC" method of exam writing the "Schimel Method."

Alex is an excellent and effective teacher. He presents useful and valuable lessons in an entertaining and matter-of-fact way. In writing this book, Alex shares his insight and his methods with readers, who will, no doubt, enjoy an experience a similar to that of the students who had the benefit of Alex as a classroom teacher.

Readers of this book are in for a treat. The book offers sensible, practical and comprehensive advice and strategies for students new to law school study and exam taking—and also to students who may have already completed the first or second year of law school and are seeking alternative strategies for greater competency and academic achievement.

There are many books available that offer new law students advice and strategies for success in law school. What makes this book so unique is the vantage point of its author: An intelligent, successful (recently graduated) law student writing a book for fellow law students, offering realistic insight, sound advice and tried and true strategies. The book is sensible, practical, comprehensive and ... funny! In reading the book, the reader hears Alex's voice. It sounds just like Alex does when he speaks. Any law student would be wise to listen.

Joanne Harvest Koren

Director, Academic Achievement Program
University of Miami School of Law

Preface

Michael Serota

Law school has the potential to be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life, but it is an acquired taste. Many students find their first final exam period to be confusing, stressful, and filled with uncertainty. This book will teach you how to let the sunshine in. It delivers an easy-to-digest, methodological approach to writing successful law school exams, with Alex Schimel's characteristic enthusiasm, optimism, and realism.

Alex was my 1L study partner. We sensed early on that something was wrong with our approach to preparing for law school exams. Our professors were focusing on policy in class, but we discovered that law school exams were primarily about practical application of the law. The real wakeup call for me came when I received an F on a practice midterm. It was obvious that undergraduate "memorization tactics" were not going to cut it.

Alex and I took a big gamble. We teamed up and took responsibility for "learning the law" ourselves. Absolving our professors of all responsibility to prepare us for our final exams, we sought out other ways to learn. In the process, we inadvertently learned how to think like real lawyers, working backwards from problems to solutions, rather than blindly memorizing rules and cases.

The gamble paid off. Alex finished his first year of law school ranked number one in our class, and I finished second. Between the two of us, we earned only one grade below an A. That's because on the last exam of the entire year, I decided to conduct a personal experiment by writing an exam based on the professor's

course outline, rather than on our methodology. Needless to say, it didn't work and I had to settle for a B+.

Finishing behind Alex was one of the greatest privileges of my academic career. I say that because Alex is one of the most compassionate, warm, friendly human beings I know. In all of our efforts at achieving personal success, we always sought out ways to bring other students along with us—first within our study groups, and then with Alex's free seminars at the law school. This book is the culmination of our desire to help guide others through the process that shaped us so thoroughly.

After our successful 1L year, we took different directions. I worked as the sole 1L summer associate at a top international firm, and then took a leave of absence from school to study ancient Jewish law in Jerusalem. Alex split his summers between public service work and a prestigious law firm in Miami. He finished school at UM (Summa Cum Laude, Order of the Coif) and is now at that same Miami firm full time. I ended up transferring to Berkeley Law School, and currently work as a federal law clerk in Washington, D.C.

In law school, you learn a lot about yourself. I learned the true meaning of hard work, perseverance, and the value of having an organized approach to exam taking. I also learned the importance of having a good friend with whom to prepare. First-year law school exams demand an incredible amount of dedication. You will answer difficult questions, based on a wide array of substantive material, in a very short period of time. Alex's book will help you develop the skills, strategy, and confidence necessary to succeed.

With that in mind, work hard, work smart, do your best, and be satisfied with the results, knowing that you did everything within your power to make your professional goals a reality. Take Alex's suggestions to heart, and make his methods your own. With training and preparation, you can make the law school exam-taking process a labor of love.