

Describing in a few words a one-year experience in one of the most challenging and exciting academic communities in the world - the Columbia University - is not an easy task. However, as the LL.M. teaches us, hurdles should never prevent us from taking on new challenges. Therefore, with the hope to aid other students in deciding (consciously) whether to join the world wide LL.M. community, I will try to depict, in the most honest and concise way, what I think is most valuable of my experience at Columbia.

But first an advice: distrust anyone (especially partners of law firms) who says that the LL.M. is useless. The LL.M. is a great opportunity to create a wide network of relationships with some of the brightest attorneys in the world, to improve your English skills and, most important, to obtain a considerable increase of your salary. I am an attorney specialized in administrative law, probably the field where an LL.M. would appear the least useful, and yet I can ensure you that the economic benefits of the LL.M. are significant and short term. Moreover, the LL.M. is a great opportunity for those lawyers who intend to switch practice without wasting their former professional experience in terms of salary.

That said, the first thing I would like to point out is that the LL.M. is not an erasmus (and I would say fortunately given its cost). The workload is substantial and, at least at the beginning, the language represents a barrier, even for those who achieved TOEFL scores above 110. The different legal system is also a considerable hurdle. Foreign students -at least those from civil law countries - must change their mind set and quickly embrace the common law method to deal with a completely different academic system. Students' ability to adapt to this new system is of essence. In a U.S. law school, professors never "tell" the law, but they guide students in a learning process where the task to infer the rules of law from cases and materials is on the students themselves. Civil law attorneys are often unprepared to such a radical change and, at the beginning, they often find frustrating attending classes which purposefully leave unsolved the most significant legal issues.

However, it is just a matter of time and practice. After few months, most of the students are able to understand the dynamics of the law school and master their subjects. Hard work usually results in remarkable achievements (we, Italian students, are in no way inferior to JDs).

I think my personal experience is emblematic on such respect. My first approach with law school (and its exams) was a disaster. I began studying like I had always done in Italy, mostly relying on memory and I underestimated the importance of practicing my writing under time constraints. At my first exam in September (luckily it was just a pass-or-fail), I was unable to complete my answer within the given time. I have to admit that at first I had a bit of discouragement, but soon I tried to get the most out of it. I analyzed my mistakes and modified my method of studying in light of the type of exams used at Columbia. Through practice and hard work (many nights spent at the library of the law school), I was able to perform well in the first semester and, at the end, I even achieved the James Kent Scholar honor (the highest honor at Columbia Law School).

The LL.M. certainly improves lawyers' flexibility and ability to master foreign legal systems. However, this is not sole lesson I received. The LL.M. also taught me the importance of speed in the legal practice (which it may be obvious to many). U.S. law school requires students to be extremely fast in their studying and trains them for the real life in U.S. law firms. Students are assigned overwhelming amounts of readings - many of which useless for exam purposes - and asked to identify what is relevant and discard what is not. It is a tough training, but in my humble opinion an extremely important one. Especially for those who practice in large law firms where M&A deals are the core business, strong reading and comprehension skills are essential and there is no other academic program that allows to develop these skills like the

LL.M. Moreover, this training is also necessary in preparation of the NY bar exam, where time pressure is the highest hurdle.

However, it would be a mistake to reduce the LL.M. to a mere academic experience. The LL.M. is much more. The best U.S. law schools are truly international academic communities; communities of thousands of students who are sufficiently alike to understand each other, but sufficiently different to learn from each other. The LL.M. provides students with the inestimable opportunity to build up true friendships with some of the most brilliant colleagues from all over the world. It creates an academic environment where (especially foreign) students are encouraged to mingle together and create a personal network which is certainly the most valuable asset of the program. In other words, the LL.M. allows young lawyers to enjoy once again college life and to appreciate its great benefits (and pleasures) with a renewed consciousness which allows them to fully take advantage of the professional opportunities that come with it.

But like any other investment, the LL.M. comes at a cost (and it is a high one). It easily exceeds \$100,000 dollars. In Italy, the number of available scholarships is very low and universities usually provide financial aid only to students who are involved in public interest. Students (and/or their families) ultimately bear such huge costs and, therefore, any financial aid, although small, represents an important relief.

I was lucky enough to be awarded with a 5,000 Euro scholarship provided by the associations ASLA and ALMA. The amount may seem negligible if compared with the overall cost of the LL.M., but I can ensure that it was of extreme importance throughout the year. It allowed me to deal with numerous hidden expenses that I had not included in my initial budget (such as the fee to register for the bar exam, the fee for the renewal of the visa) and to pay the bar preparation course.

Therefore, I am very grateful to both ASLA and ALMA for the important help that they generously offered me and I hope that this kind of remarkable initiatives will increase so to allow other young professionals to participate in program that is more than an academic program: it is an inestimable experience of life.

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