

Young Lawyers: Why We Are Important to Decalogue

by Amanda Decker

One of the major questions that always gets brought up at Decalogue board meetings or even among the general membership is why do we keep losing membership? The answer is seemingly simple, yet still complex. Decalogue struggles to gain interest among law school students, maintain relationships with the law schools, and then continue a connection with lawyers after they obtain their licensure.

Why is this? There are a few potential answers I can provide. However, you may wonder, why should I care what this random person thinks on this issue? Well, I am not only the co-chair of the Young Lawyers and Law Students Committee, but I am also a young lawyer myself. I was fairly active in Decalogue throughout law school, both in my law school chapter, and within the larger professional organization. I have managed to talk with many of my peers on the issue of membership in legal professional organizations, and the following will be a brief attempt to summarize and analyze their responses and my experience.

REASON ONE: Lack of law school engagement

The first year of law school, known as 1L, is one of the most difficult times for anyone beginning their new legal career. The last thing someone is thinking about when they start law school is what organizations they should join. It's ultimately more work and time than a 1L has. However, law schools usually push beginning law students to attend an organization fair. During my organization fair, I remember thinking to myself that if I was going to be pressured to join an organization, I might as well join one centered around Jewish culture, as my heritage is really what got me interested in justice and the law.

When I walked into the fair, I found friendly faces from OUTLaw, ABA, and the Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois. Missing from the organization fair was a delegation from Decalogue. I was really disappointed and made a point once I got on the board of the student organization to be at every organization fair from then on out.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to my school or this particular organization fair. We simply don't have as much of a presence on campuses as we should. What would have helped in that situation would have been Decalogue members who were alumni from my school, or even just members in general from the professional organization, to help pick up the slack for the student leadership of the organization and impress on them the importance of initial outreach. My goal as co-chair of the Young Lawyers and Law Students committee is to organize ways for Decalogue professional members to attend organization fairs and help support our student organizations in finding speakers or BEING speakers. I plan to attend the next organization fair at my alma matter to help put my money where my mouth is, and I also plan on providing other ways for students to show up when we reach out to them.

REASON TWO: Failure to show students and lawyers the value Decalogue Society of Lawyers provides

The above issue is directly connected to law school engagement. What value do we, as an organization, hold to law students and young lawyers? What is really going to get them to give up valuable study/relaxation/work time to come to an event? The answer is we DO have value, but we have failed to adequately advertise our value. We have membership with knowledge, time, and expertise.

Young lawyers and law students require mentorship to understand our profession and succeed. It is impossible to learn everything you need to know about the practice of law from law school courses. Law school teaches theories but fails to provide the practical expertise, which bar associations can provide. In law school, we don't learn about CLEs. We don't learn about the stress of practice and the emotional labor that goes into practicing law. We certainly don't learn healthy coping mechanisms, despite how hard law schools attempt to teach us. Mentors can be excellent resources for these pitfalls of a law school education and creating these relationships is extremely beneficial for all involved.

One thing I have valued most from my Decalogue Society membership has been the camaraderie. Law school can fracture relationships between future lawyers and friends from the past, as individuals grow in different directions. Being a law student and young lawyer can be very lonely. In my tenure as president of the JMLS chapter of Decalogue, I created situations where we could socialize with no networking or law-related expectations. If one of the younger students needed help with a memo or an outline, I was happy to provide professional mentorship, but my goal was mostly to help students learn how to unwind (usually with food because that's the way my Jewish mother taught me to make people feel comfortable). In Decalogue Society's professional chapter, the various socials and events we have exist to provide an environment where we can decompress with each other, kvetch, kvell, and generally invest emotionally in interpersonal relationships. If we can better advertise these benefits of Decalogue Society to young lawyers and law students, I guarantee we will get more attendance.

Finally, we have knowledgeable members who put on spectacular continuing legal education courses ("CLEs"), but many first-year attorneys have no idea which CLEs are needed or what CLEs Decalogue Society provides. We do a decent job advertising CLEs to our general membership, but we need to better educate potential young lawyer members as to the benefits of participating in the CLEs in order to get more people interested in attending.

REASON THREE: Accessibility

Accessibility is pretty straight forward. Law students and young lawyers generally have no money. This problem is even worse now for the immediate reason of COVID-19, and the less immediate reason of the growing debt to wage ratio among millennials and Generation Z. When this is compounded by the competition in the legal field, especially in Chicago, it creates situations, which frequently push recent graduates out of the field.

This makes the idea of spending money on a membership for a bar association difficult financially. Decalogue is already on the right track with free student memberships, free memberships for first year lawyers, and scaled rates for numbers of years in practice. However, our events can sometimes be far too expensive, and many members still cannot afford a \$60 membership after their first year of practice (or they think they can't). One way to fix this is to advertise our CLEs more thoroughly so people understand the value of their membership. Another creative solution would be to allow members to volunteer time or other valuable skills in exchange for reduced fees/waived costs for events. More free events or "pay what you want" events would be helpful as well.

REASON FOUR: Messaging

There is a large messaging issue among Jewish organizations and Jewish young adults today. The focus seems to be heavily on what Judaism means to one group of people, while failing to provide a balanced approach as to what Judaism means to multiple groups of Jews. For example, many Jewish nonprofits focus heavily on Israel, either in sending money to Israel or criticism of Israel. However, such focus and programming is not of interest to many young Jews. This isn't to say young Jews don't care about Israel; it's to say many young Jews care about issues affecting them DIRECTLY wherever they live. Focusing on Israel can distract from what the organization intends to do for the Jews more directly impacted by its message.

Another good example is anti-Semitism. Many young Jews don't think anti-Semitism is relevant to them because Jewish organizations fail to get their message across to young Jews that anti-Semitism is still very much a reality, even for people who think they've "assimilated." When discussing anti-Semitism, Jewish organizations could better get their message across to the younger generation by connecting anti-Semitism with modern fights for equality, which many young Jews, especially lawyers, care about.

Similarly, Decalogue Society, at times, presents its mission in an antiquated manner. Thankfully, this is being addressed by our Board as we draft a new mission statement. Keeping the perspectives and interests of younger lawyers in mind when drafting the new mission statement will help our organization grow into a place where the next generation of lawyers will want to be present and participate.

CONCLUSION

Decalogue Society of Lawyers is the oldest Jewish bar association in the United States. With such a long history, it stands to reason that the ways in which the last generation engages with the next generation needs to grow and evolve. With more established lawyers reaching out to guide, relate, and listen to younger lawyers and law students, we can bridge the gap and attract more young members, thus ensuring the continued existence and wellbeing of our membership and organization.

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