



Law Students Transitioning Into Legal Practice

Professional boundaries for students, lawyer-teachers, and legal employers

Companion viewer packet | Engle Committee Film Series | Decorum.law

At a glance

- The film uses three transition moments: family pressure to give legal help, a student seeking fact-specific advice from an adjunct professor, and a rushed summer job acceptance.
- The teaching goal is role clarity: know which hat you are wearing, say it out loud, and avoid creating reliance, unauthorized practice, or broken commitments.

Core takeaway

Professionalism often turns on the sentence said before the problem escalates: 'I cannot give legal advice,' 'I am answering as your professor, not your lawyer,' or 'I need the offer terms in writing before I can commit.'

Educational note: This packet is a teaching aid based on approved script materials. It is not legal advice and should not substitute for current rules, statutes, case law, or institutional policies.

1. Family Pressure and Unauthorized Practice

The first scenario is familiar because it sounds like a favor: a relative wants a law student to write a 'lawyer letter' about a property dispute. The professional line is crossed when the student is asked to speak, write, negotiate, or threaten legal action for someone else.

Do not do this

- Do not write a demand letter or use lawyer-sounding language to pressure another person.
- Do not say or imply that you represent the family member, even informally.
- Do not negotiate, threaten suit, or analyze the person's legal rights as counsel.
- Do not accept money, gifts, or family pressure as a reason to ignore licensing limits.

A professional way to help

- Explain that you are not licensed and cannot provide legal advice or representation.
- Offer general public resources or help locate a licensed lawyer.
- Help the person organize facts or goals without advising on legal rights or strategy.
- Share the rule or statute so the boundary is not personal - it is professional.

Language to practice

'I care about you, but I am not licensed and cannot represent you or give legal advice. I can help you find a lawyer or public information, but I cannot write the letter or tell you what legal position to take.'

Discussion prompts

- What makes this request the practice of law rather than family help?
- How should a student respond when guilt, tuition help, or family expectations are used as pressure?
- What could the student do that would preserve the relationship without creating a legal relationship?
- How would the analysis change if the student were newly licensed but not competent in the subject matter?

Authorities to cite during discussion: Fla. Stat. § 454.23; Rules Regulating The Florida Bar ch. 11, including Rules 11-1.2, 11-1.3, 11-1.4, and 11-1.7; Rules Regulating The Florida Bar 4-1.1 and 4-1.2(c) for newly licensed lawyers considering limited or unfamiliar work.

2. The Lawyer-Teacher Hat

The second scenario asks an adjunct professor to answer a student's personal copyright question after class. The question sounds related to the lesson, but it quickly becomes fact-specific legal advice. The professor's best move is not just to refuse - it is to teach the boundary.

What the professor can do

- Clarify: 'I am speaking as your professor, not as your lawyer.'
- Answer general doctrine from class without applying it to the student's facts.
- Direct the student to research tools, legal clinics, referral services, or independent counsel.
- Use the moment to explain conflicts, engagement letters, and why lawyers do not give casual legal advice.

What the professor should avoid

- Do not convert the student's real facts into a 'hypothetical' answer.
- Do not give strategic advice about ownership, claims, filings, or wording.
- Do not let the student's inability to pay become the reason for informal advice.
- Do not create a reasonable belief that an attorney-client relationship exists.

Professional reset sentence

'That sounds like a real personal matter, so I cannot advise you on it in my role as professor. I can explain the classroom concept generally and point you to resources for finding counsel.'

Questions for viewers

- At what line does the student's class question become a request for legal advice?
- Could the professor preserve a positive teaching relationship without answering the legal question?
- What policies might a law school or employer have about professor-student client relationships?
- How should lawyers explain that not every helpful conversation is appropriate legal advice?

Authorities to cite during discussion: Rule 4-5.7; Dean v. Dean, 607 So. 2d 494 (Fla. 4th DCA 1992); Bartholomew v. Bartholomew, 611 So. 2d 85 (Fla. 2d DCA 1992).

3. First Professional Commitments

The summer employment scene is not just about a student choosing the better job. It is about how lawyers and future lawyers handle commitments when the hiring process itself is rushed, incomplete, and unequal.

Student checklist

- Ask for the offer in writing, including pay, hours, duration, start date, supervisor, and location.
- Ask for a reasonable response deadline before committing.
- Do not accept two incompatible jobs or assume one employer will simply understand.
- If a conflict has already happened, immediately call the employer, withdraw directly, and confirm in writing.

Employer checklist

- Use written offers and avoid 'answer right now' pressure except in genuinely unavoidable circumstances.
- Give students time to evaluate terms and consult career services or mentors.
- Remember that temporary student employees are future lawyers and should be treated as members of the profession.
- Train students before substantive work on confidentiality, conflicts, reporting lines, and limits on authority.

Moment	Professional response	Why it matters
Offer is verbal only	Request basic terms in writing.	A clear record prevents misunderstanding.
Deadline is immediate	Ask for a specific, reasonable extension.	Pressure does not produce reliable professional judgment.
Better offer arrives	Pause, contact the first employer, and make a clean written choice.	Reputation begins before admission to the Bar.

Key authorities and tools

Facilitator closing question

Ask participants to write one sentence they will use in the next year to set a professional boundary before pressure turns into a problem.

Rules Regulating The Florida Bar 4-5.1 and 4-5.3 - supervisory responsibilities for lawyers and nonlawyer assistants.

Rules Regulating The Florida Bar ch. 11 - law school practice program requirements and supervised student practice.

The Florida Bar Professionalism Expectations - communication, honor, integrity, fair play, and respectful treatment of others.

NALP Principles for a Fair and Ethical Recruitment Process - useful tool for law student hiring discussions.