

25 How to Make Surfboards: A Checklist for Our Graduates

When I first started my PhD research here at the Maastricht University Faculty of Law back in 2012, I had yet to realize that I had just stumbled fortuitously into my dream job: that of a teacher. Over the last decade, I've been entrusted with the awesome opportunity to work with students that have walked through the halls of Bouillonstraat and it is an honour for me to address our graduates here now.

To be given the chance to influence how a student will grow is a tremendous privilege, but it is also an extremely difficult challenge. It is a job that forces us to constantly reflect on the question of what kind of people we want to help our graduates become. Some are satisfied with a graduate who has accumulated all of the substantive knowledge and practical skill set offered by our *prix fixe* curriculum. However, I for one cannot be truly proud of our graduates simply because they have learned how to distinguish *consideration* from *causa* or memorized how to regurgitate some other seemingly arbitrary fact that our faculty has deemed important at one point or another for examination purposes.

To paraphrase Hume – who wrote ‘be a philosopher; but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man’ – it is one thing to demand that our graduates develop substantive understanding of the law; but perhaps more importantly, I hope for our graduates that they have acquired the skills necessary to be civically engaged difference-makers, capable of contributing to society that is desperately in need of their help.

On this point, one recent graduate shared with me a quote that has been stuck in my mind for some time now: ‘Ironing boards are just surfboards that gave up on their dreams and got real jobs.’ While there is no shame in being an ironing board with a real job, it is my sincere hope that our graduates never give up on pursuing their dreams. With that in mind, I offer our graduates an incomplete and perhaps overly generalized checklist to help them become surfboards with kickass careers.

1. **Ignited Sense of Purpose:** Attending a university is synonymous with exploring one's boundaries, accumulating experiences, and – as clichéd as it sounds – finding oneself. For our graduates, that means having discovered their ‘thing’ (or perhaps what it's not). A particular field of law or a cause that they can really lose themselves in. For some, this is a narrowing-down process that involves continuously asking the questions ‘do I really like what I am doing?’ and ‘is there a reason why I am doing this?’. If the answers to both questions are in the negative, they ought to reassess their life trajectory regardless of the sunk costs. As everything worth doing in life will eventually require some dedication and sacrifice, I hope that our graduates have invested their time and effort into something that resonates with them. Having a sense of purpose and being passionate will equip our graduates with the strength to persevere when the going inevitably gets tough. As Viktor Frankl once wrote, ‘what is to give light must endure burning’ and it is easier to endure the hardships when you have a sense of purpose.
2. **Discovered Potentials and Limitations:** Only by being presented with various challenges can our graduates come to realize their capabilities and their limitations. Even when they fail to achieve a certain goal, they ought to have internalized the mantra that dealing with adversity is an opportunity for growth in disguise. A college education ought to have

forged a firm belief within our graduates that their ideas and actions are capable of making changes within their environment. Yet, at the same time, they must acquire coping mechanisms and the ability to conjure a sense of serenity when confronted with insurmountable obstacles. In other words, our graduates should know how to differentiate between the things that they can change and the things that they cannot (at least presently). As Solomon ibn Gabirol once wrote, and as was later popularized by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, ‘at the head of all understanding is realizing what is and what cannot be, and the consoling of what is not in our power to change.’

3. **Built Resilience:** In the process of discovering their sense of purpose and tapping into their potential, our graduates will hopefully have learned resilience and coping mechanisms that will serve as life jackets when they feel defeated. Bouncing back after facing adversity is a process that can be facilitated by accepting what one is capable of and also by having a sense of perspective. With regard to the latter, the Dutch philosopher Spinoza coined the phrase *sub specie aeternitatis*, or to look at everything under the aspect of eternity. Many of the problems that we think we are burdened with pale in comparison to our place in the universe and eternity as a frame of reference. Perhaps more practically, the pioneering inventor, Thomas Edison famously uttered ‘I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.’ Being resilient becomes easier once the graduates can internalize the counter-intuitive truth that failure is a key component of growth and a step towards – not away from – achieving their goals. In short, framing and perspective-taking can do wonders for building one’s resilience.
4. **Became Accountable:** Our graduates ought to be people that others can rely on, which implies that they not only have the dedication to act in furtherance of a collective goal, but in the event that their actions fail to yield a successful outcome, are mature enough to own up to it. They will not make excuses, but instead, will work tirelessly to figure out what went wrong, how to fix it, and avoid making that same mistake in the future. Our graduates will be quick to give credit where it’s due and take blame as necessary. In the hallowed words of Winston Churchill, later paraphrased by Spiderman, ‘the price of greatness is responsibility’ and our graduates should know that without the latter, the former is unattainable.
5. **Developed Compassion:** His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama noted that ‘if you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.’ Our graduates, ideally, would possess within them the never-ending urge to continue improving the well-being of not only themselves, but also of those around them. Having empathy and being able to understand another from their perspective is an invaluable skill; as Plato once wrote, ‘be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle.’ To be compassionate though, requires an extra gear. Our graduates will not only go to lengths to understand the views of others and how they can contribute to this world, but they will not shy away from *acting* with kindness as well.
6. **Cultivated a Network:** Our graduates ought to strive to be positive members of their communities through compassion and civic engagement; and in doing so, they will acquire lifelong friends, trustworthy mentors and underclassmen that they will look after and lead. In addition, their attempts to cultivate their offline social network will incentivize our graduates to resist the gravitational pull towards self-absorption. The network of peers, teachers and other supporters will bring out the best in our graduates, transforming them into better versions of themselves. One practical tip offered by the

esteemed psychologist Martin E.P. Seligman in this regard is for our students to realize that ‘authentic happiness derives from raising the bar for yourself, not rating yourself against others.’ While the practice of law can be rather competitive and adversarial in nature, our graduates will have inculcated into their moral compasses the adage passed on by Aesop that ‘no act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.’ Our graduates should not hesitate to offer a helping hand to those in need, thus expanding their network and strengthening their relationships in the process.

7. **Ready to Flourish:** Perhaps it has become banal to encourage one to find what makes them happy and to do what makes them happy, but because there is some wisdom underneath this sentiment, it is worth reiterating it here. *Eudaimonia* is a Greek word, which encapsulates the sense of human flourishing and prosperity. With any luck, our graduates are on track to finding their personalized eudaimonia for they will have the purpose, potential, resilience, accountability and compassion to become meaningful contributors in their respective communities with a network of supporters behind them.

Before closing, I would like to share with our graduates the traditional Irish blessing that I share with the students at the end of my course: ‘May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face; the rains fall soft upon your fields and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.’ I am grateful that our paths have crossed in Maastricht and I hope we meet again in the near future!

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