# “Getting To Know Them”

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One of the most vexing (and saddest) problems many seniors applying to law school face is lack of faculty members who they know well enough to ask for letters of evaluation/recommendation. Often students tell me that since many of their classes have had large enrollments, they really didn’t get to know any of their professors and the professors didn’t get to know them. At this point this is clearly a practical problem (e.g. finding professors who can write letters for them), but it also points to a more significant problem in the University: the relationship, or lack thereof, between students and faculty members.

First, and most significant, is what this says about students missing the opportunity to take full advantage of their educational experience. It indicates that all too often the learning experience is merely one of “ give and take”, rather than one of interaction. That is, the Professors give and the students take. This represents something of a department store “mentality” in that there is only a “service” connection between the giver and the receiver. No relationship is established. No meaningful interaction takes place. How can this problem be overcome at both the practical and educational level? It is not enough to simply say “ get to know your professors”. The real question is “How do you accomplish this in a way that enhances the educational experience as well as satisfying the practical problem?”

It is clear that the students must take the initiative in the process. Faculty members can’t be expected to be the prime movers in this situation. What can the student do? First, and at the highest level, where appropriate and desirable, the student can seek to establish some sort of mentoring relationship with a faculty member. This can perhaps be formalized through an independent study or, less formally, through discussions after class or during the professor’s office hours.

Second, think about inviting a faculty member to join you for lunch or coffee at one of the eateries or watering holes on campus. Sometimes it may be desirable and more comfortable to do this in groups, two or three students and one faculty member. Another means of accomplishing this, at least at the initial stage, is by having a living group sponsor faculty/student functions. Two words of caution, in planning lunch or receptions for faculty members, be persistent!! Just because one faculty member says no, don’t stop there. Invite other faculty members. Second, remember that faculty members have families and real lives outside of Duke. Try to arrange most opportunities during normal working hours.

Don’t forget, getting to know faculty members can be enjoyable, can enrich the total educational experience, and can solve the letter of recommendation problem!