



ARE YOU A LAW STUDENT? HERE'S HOW TO CAPITALIZE ON FBA BENEFITS

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Throughout my law school experience, my Federal Bar Association (FBA) membership has remained the most enjoyable, advantageous, and influential opportunity for life-after-law-school career development. I graduated from the Charleston School of Law in May 2018, and I am thrilled that the FBA will continue to be a part of my future career. I feel honored and I am truly thankful for the avenues the FBA has created for me, both nationally and through our South Carolina (SC) Chapter.

This article is intended to promote more law student participation within the FBA.

How I Discovered the Benefits

Early on—as a brand new first-year student—Crystal Swinford, president of the Charleston School of Law FBA Chapter, invited me to join the monthly FBA meeting. So I did. This meeting's distinguished guest speaker was Christie Varnado, then chair of the circuit vice presidents and former president of the SC Chapter, now a director of the national FBA. I immediately realized the great opportunities FBA offered law students. I joined that day—before I left the room. The greatest takeaway I remember from this meeting is that every benefit Varnado discussed about FBA remains true!

I eventually became the president of my law school FBA Chapter. It has been almost three years since that initial meeting, but I still feel the same way about the benefits of the FBA.

What Came From My Participation?

During my tenure as chapter president at Charleston School of Law, Matthew Hubbell, immediate past president of the SC Chapter,

invited students to various mentoring events. We eagerly took him up on each invitation. Varnado, Piper Byzet, and Janet Holmes helped us grow our membership more than 500 percent by facilitating and allowing us to achieve our goals. They each made time in the midst of their own career responsibilities and made an effort to support our law school chapter.

Several South Carolina professionals—like Brian Duffy, Brian Quisenberry, and FBA members from the law firm of Young Clement Rivers LLC—all welcomed law students to join in on the mentoring avenues FBA offered. Soon our local Charleston School of Law FBA Chapter began facilitating SOLACE events with elementary students, as well as having end of semester networking events—all with the help of FBA local members.

What Is In It for You?

One important area I want to share with law students across the nation is the “untapped” opportunity of attending FBA law conferences. I say this because I can attest on behalf of my chapter where I and various members have participated in many FBA conferences and events locally and nationally.

One thing we noticed at many of the conferences we attended is that the proportion of law students compared to the practicing attorneys and judges in attendance is relatively low. We embraced these opportunities. Many more law students could benefit just as we have by attending. Below is a list of conferences and events members of our chapter attended over the last few years:

National FBA Events

- Annual Meeting & Convention
- Art Law Conference
- Employment Law Conference
- Immigration Law Conference
- Indian Law Conference
- Rising Symposium Conference
- Tax Law Conference

Local FBA and SC Chapter Events

- FBA invitation by Brian Duffy at his firm Duffy & Young in Charleston, S.C.
- FBA invitation to “Discussion with Former Vice President Joe Biden”
- FBA SOLACE event with local elementary school—interactive mock trial
- Local FBA invitation to the Charleston, S.C., district court
- SC Chapter Annual Conference
- SC Chapter Social Networking FBA Events
- SC Chapter welcome reception with national FBA President Hon. Michael J. Newman and the national FBA executive board

Additionally, the Charleston School of Law FBA Chapter attended the 2018 FBA Annual Meeting & Convention this past September in New York City.

I must add: Our faculty adviser and Charleston School of Law student members took a leap of faith in me as the new chapter president. However, now they can attest that the FBA is a definite way to interact with local and national FBA professionals—one that would otherwise never happen in a law school setting.¹ This is very possible for your chapter. It is easy to accomplish more involvement; however, it does require purposeful identification of the interests most important to your FBA chapter members. Then place those interests into a plan and take action. Think of ways to utilize resources that can be found within your local state chapter, local FBA professionals, the tools found in FBA communications and on the website, FBA discounts, and also your law school resources. The pathways are there; however, the courage and initiative has to be discovered by individuals wanting to benefit from the opportunities the FBA creates.

Why Conferences?

There are several advantages to attending conferences, namely:

- 1. It Costs Less as a Student.** It is a lot less expensive to attend *now* while you are finding your career path versus once you are practicing. Look at the cost of attending conferences for law students—do you notice the price differential of students versus practicing attorneys? You will not get CLE credits, but you will get once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to learn alongside current professionals and meet individuals that can answer questions for you that textbooks likely cannot.
- 2. You Gain Knowledge In a Comfortable Setting.** Confer-

ence experiences are a prime time to learn about different areas of law—*before* you are locked-in to a certain specialty of law after the state bar. Plus, once you meet someone in the field, they generally are forthcoming about the questions you may have about the industry. They care just as much as you do that you find your right path. Honestly. You cannot reverse time, so use your time wisely. You really feel as if you met friends for life in various areas of law across our nation. You never know when one can provide an answer to an area of law to you, and vice versa.

- 3. It Creates Engagement in Your School's Chapter.** At our law school FBA chapter, we opened up the opportunity to all members to choose a conference of interest. As a result, the follow-up engagement of these individuals in the areas of law covered in the events they attended was (personally) rewarding to witness. Some found the confirmation they needed to focus on the area of law, while others decided to attend other conferences to see other opportunities in law. One success story to mention briefly. A 2017 graduate was contemplating not using her law degree—but after attending a conference post-graduation, she is now sitting for the 2018 bar! All thanks to the FBA. The conference she attended helped her identify an area of law that works for her interests.

How to Make it Work While Attending Law School

Like many things in law school, success all comes down to prioritizing, teamwork, and smart scheduling:

- 1. Poll Each Member to Identify Which Conferences Are of Interest.** Ask members to commit to their preferred choice of conferences and to submit an attendance application for each conference they plan on attending. Then think of ways to mitigate the cost to attend. Find hotel points, rental car discounts, etc., and then propose reimbursement through a grant from your student bar association (SBA). Thankfully, through combined efforts, our chapter managed to financially find a way to cover each conference we attended. We pulled it off.
- 2. Use Your Chapter's Combined Problem-Solving Skills to Find Creative Solutions.** For instance: It is less expensive to book a four-person suite with a discount, book flights in advance, and budget expenses prior to departing. Research FBA partner discounts—they are an excellent way to reduce the costs! If available, apply for student grants through your SBA, presenting the benefits and reducing overall costs where possible. We drove where we could, we carpooled at times, and we found discount flights all in hope for reimbursement. Thankfully, our school SBA reimbursed us and we had awesome pictures to show the impact it brought for our student body. You might not have these same situations available; however, if you start by looking at conferences, you will surely find a way.
- 3. Use the Conference Schedule to Your Advantage.** Most conferences occur Thursday night, Friday, and Saturday morning. This schedule is doable around classes. Plan to at least attend Friday and Saturday, then study afterward prior to Monday. We were fortunate that Friday classes were minimal so we were determined that if we left after class on Thursday we could make it happen. Indeed, we did. No regrets.

How to Make the Most of the FBA

I give my gift of experience to you, as a law student in your same situation, and offer several tips:

- Take business cards—buy them if you do not have them already. It is generally inexpensive and easy to design your own cards online. Do not forget to also ask for business cards from the people you meet.
- Join LinkedIn and utilize it often. Invite the individuals you made a connection with at FBA events to join your network.
- Make conversations at FBA events. I personally have never been declined or ignored. Attitude is truly latitude. Do not worry, you might be perceived as “a baby lawyer in the making,” but *enjoy this moment* as a law school student and embrace it. When you begin to practice, you might wish you had asked more questions prior to swearing-in to your state’s bar.
- Keep the printed meeting agenda! All speakers’ names are generally listed in order. Write down the names of those you connected with so you can follow up with them later. Doing this will also help you keep a record of who you did not get to connect with so you can reach out to them.
- Use the FBA Networking App at conferences. If you have a phone that offers the ability to download it, it is worth it. Every attendee is listed on it. Send thank-you notes to your new connections.
- Become familiar with and use the member directory to your advantage. Look up valuable partner company savings and discounts. You can also identify areas of law that interest you and get involved in the upcoming events.
- For community service projects, check out the on the FBA’s site. The FBA does a lot of the legwork for your chapter. Print it, plan it, and execute it. Take pictures and share recaps of your events with the FBA to showcase your community impact.

What to Expect: FBA Culture

Imagine walking into a room full of professionals, reading names on lanyards, and feeling the freedom to have a discussion with individuals who were once in your shoes. Moral of the story of our journey—and they respond by providing on-the-job knowledge, which is simply not attainable in a law school environment. That is what you find at conferences and local events. When I tell you that every professional I have encountered has treated me as not just a law student, but as a *federal bar* law student, I truly mean it. What this means, is that everyone in the FBA, as a whole, is embraced and newcomers naturally feel welcome.

Sometimes even tenured professionals have questions *you* may be able to answer from your perspective. Do not make assumptions that you will be considered the “unworthy” law student. Trust me. Nor should you worry about being quizzed on all-encompassing aspects of law verbatim.

Students can be confident that it is OK to say: “I do not know what areas of law I want to enter,” and it is also OK to say “I am unfamiliar with the subject matter, please tell me more.” Not once have I been told “too bad” or been scoffed away. Instead, expect to receive insightful perspectives about the opportunities in that professional’s subject of law. Personally, these conversations have helped me zero in on finding new areas of interest in the law. Not to mention, you will be amazed to discover areas you were not aware of!

Moral of the story: The “aha” moments at FBA functions far outweigh the fear of asking questions.

What Are You Waiting For?

I realize I have mentioned a lot of FBA members. There are so many more individuals who have “wowed” me that I cannot even begin to mention. Just to name a few: Elizabeth “Betty” Stevens, who likely knows all areas relating to immigration law; Hon. Gerald Rosen, who helped me find solutions to tough evidence questions; and Octavio Robles, who provided insight for conflicting areas in art law. These are only a small sample of the amazing individuals I have had the opportunity to meet at FBA events.

Our chapter members were all humbled to meet the past president of the national FBA, Hon. Michael Newman, and current President Kip Bollin, as well as the phenomenal FBA staff, Melissa Schettler and Caitlin Rider, who resolve all FBA operational-type questions.

FBA culture seems like one big family of law. If you have not taken advantage of the opportunities, it is not too late. Read your emails. Utilize the resources communicated to you. Plan and build excitement in your chapter. If there is a desire, the answer is always a question away. Email me if you get stumped. I can be found on the FBA directory and on LinkedIn. I will gladly help, too. ☺



Nina N. Sperling graduated from the Charleston School of Law on May 13, 2018, and was awarded the Honorary Charleston School of Law William Bennet Regan Award for Outstanding Leadership and Commitment to Public Service. She has been a Federal Bar Association member since 2016. Sperling was a prior president of the Federal Bar Association Student Division, a pupil of the Petigru Inn of Court, a prior justice of Phi Alpha Delta Haynesworth Chapter, a student ambassador, and also a member of multiple other student organizations. She was the 2018 Pro Bono Populi Service Award recipient and was recognized for outstanding public service through her pro bono contributions in Charleston, S.C., community. She completed the Comprehensive International Trial Advocacy course in Oxford, England, and has been employed as a law clerk and an intern at the Mediation and Meeting Center of Charleston (MMCC). She completed the required SC Bar Family Mediation training course in March 2018 and is currently a roster member for the MMCC. Prior to her legal studies, she worked 18 years for a corporation and enjoyed the skills and experiences she gained as a field manager. She graduated from the University of Louisville with a B.A. in psychology and minor in women gender studies, receiving honors of dean’s list, Golden Key, and Psi Chi in December 2015. As a study abroad diplomat she had the opportunity to learn international law in six different countries through a partnership with Stetson University College of Law. She took the South Carolina bar exam in July 2018. Sperling lives by the motto: “We rise by lifting others.”

Endnote

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