Zehra Jaffery's first year of law school did not get off to a very good start.

During the last five minutes of her first exam, she realized one question remained. She didn't get to answer it, so her grades for the first year didn't meet her expectations. As she packed up to head home to Oklahoma City for the summer, she was devastated and worried that her career in law had ended before it began.

But within two weeks, she landed a job in a federal judge's office near her home, which the law school agreed to accept for credit under one of its field-experience programs. Within two weeks, Jaffery was working directly under the judge. When they sat down to review her first writing assignment, she was shocked to learn that only minor grammatical changes had been made, and that all of her citations were fine. The judge told Jaffery that her writing was strong.

She went on to spend the summer reviewing attorney briefs, sitting in on confidential meetings with attorneys in the judge's chambers, attending civil and criminal trials, and visiting a federal prison. So when it was time to head back to Baltimore for her second year of law school, she was ready.

"This was the best work experience I've ever had in my life," she says. "I walked away with such a different perspective on my life..."
and my abilities. It helped me realize that regardless of what happens in a classroom, in the real world, I know I can hold my own.”

Like Jaffrey, about 25 percent of the law school’s students gain hands-on experience each year in one of two programs: the Asper Fellowship Program and the externship program. While they differ in intensity, both programs are voluntary, offer students academic credit on a credit/no credit basis, and are supervised by faculty members. More importantly, law school officials say, the experience boosts the confidence and skill levels of the fledgling lawyers.

“It’s learning by doing and learning by being that help students develop insights that they wouldn’t have gained just through the classroom,” says Jana B. Singer, associate dean for academic programs. “It brings the issues to life.”

Bringing the issues to life was important to late Professor Lewis D. Asper, who taught contracts and commercial law at the School from 1954 until his death in 1969 and for whom the fellowship program is named. Asper, who pursued a Wall Street practice prior to his teaching career, believed it was important for law students to understand the real-life applications of what they learn in the classroom. This belief inspired the law school to establish the fellowship program in 1970, appropriately naming it after Asper.

Through the Asper program, students typically earn two credits for working at least 10 hours per week with a state or federal judge, or with attorneys for governmental or non-profit organizations. The fellowships are open to students after their first year of law school, and students are responsible for seeking out their own placements, which they then submit to the School for approval. They must give monthly progress reports to their faculty advisors, and meet with the advisors at least three times throughout the placement.

The externship program, which is also open to students after their first year, is more intense. Students can earn between four and 13 credits for their work with governmental or non-profit agencies that deal with legal issues, depending on the nature of the work and the time devoted to it. The time devoted to it can range anywhere from two to five days a week. Most often, students choose the placements from a list supplied by the law school, but every placement must be approved by a special committee. The student must meet with a faculty advisor each month, and at the end of the externship, prepare a final report detailing the value of the experience.

The law school intends for the placements to require more than just library research and memo writing. Students attest that it does.

James R. Benjamin Jr., a third-year student in environmental law, worked eight hours a day, three days a week, last spring during his externship with the National Wildlife Federation (NWF).

He used the time on his hour-and-a-half train ride to and from NWF’s offices in Washington, D.C., to do work for his classes.

But once at the office, he was intent on its mission. He helped to write an amicus brief for a case the Federation was building against a mining company, charging that its operations were causing hazardous materials to seep into an aquifer, and thus into the supply of drinking water for a local community.

“The experience helped me to see the real-world perspective in the everyday workings of the law,” says Benjamin. “It has given me a focus as far as what I want to do.”

After graduating, he hopes to work for a government agency to help rehabilitate land that once used by manufacturers, now lies abandoned, and often contaminated. He’d like to help initiate programs to clean up and revitalize the property, and then have viable businesses put it to good use. “It’s definitely a vision I have,” he says.

Andrew P. Reese, a part-time student in his third year, also solidified his vision for his future through his work as an Asper fellow with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in Baltimore. Because he hopes someday to work in public interest law, it seemed natural for him to put in 32 hours a week last summer, researching and writing arguments for the ACLU’s legal efforts to have lawyers present at bail reviews in the state of Maryland. Reese says the work he did really sharpened his research and writing skills, especially because his faculty advisor, Karen Czapanskiy, was so helpful. He met regularly with her to talk about ways that he could improve his research strategy.
“She really helped me to argue my case well, and to present the arguments on both sides,” he says. Making strong, solid arguments for the ACLU seemed much more critical than making them in a classroom assignment, he says.

“By the end of the semester, you’re willing to accept a B+ or A- on a paper, but on this, you can’t, because it’s someone else’s paper and it’s real,” he says.

Brian Higgins, a third-year law student, says his current externship with the Applied Physics Laboratory at the Johns Hopkins University is a great complement to his classes.

The externship is part of the School’s Intellectual Property Workshop, which offers students a theoretical and practical perspective on how intellectual property is created, valued and transferred. The workshop pairs a weekly seminar with field placement that focuses on technology transfer and intellectual property practice.

Higgins points out that the School of Law offers courses that cover patent preparation, and patent law and litigation, but only from a theoretical perspective. At the physics lab, he’s actually talking to inventors and helping to write patent applications for them.

“These are the skills you’re going to have to learn on the job, so you might as well get a leg up on them in law school,” he says.

Indeed, that is the idea behind the Asper Fellowship and the externship programs, as well as others designed by the law school. Currently, law school officials are bolstering another field placement program that pairs special workshops with related jobs on a smaller scale, but also for credit. It’s all part of the School’s commitment to make sure that its graduates hit the ground running, says Singer.

Kimberly S. L. Essary ’00 is counting on that commitment. She’s confident that the real-world experience she gained first as an Asper fellow, and later in an externship, will make her more marketable, as she builds a career in international trade law.

She had come to study law at Maryland right after earning her undergraduate degree in government in 1997 from Smith College. So she never had any real-life work experience.

In her second year of law school, as an Asper Fellow, Essary worked for the U. S. Coast Guard’s Office of National Maritime Law. Two days a week she reviewed cases involving the suspension or revocation of merchant marines’ licenses, and safety aspects of ships. Since that was such a positive experience, in her third year she opted to do an externship with the Office of the U. S. Trade Representative, in its Asia Pacific division. Among other duties, she drafted responses to members of Congress who voiced concerns to the agency on behalf of companies from their districts that were having international trade problems.

Essary says that the two placements have made her much more ready to take her place in the world of law.

“They’ve given me experience I would not have had otherwise,” she says. “I’m only 25 years old, but a law firm can say, ‘Hey, while she was in law school, she wasn’t just learning the law, she was practicing to be a lawyer.’”