

Passing the Québec Bar – The Final Installment (aka part 6)

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After dealing with the Bar registration process, the Bar books, the day to day classes, the topics we studied, and the exams, now is the time to wrap it all up and talk about the fun stuff.

Right about now, you would expect to see the little blurb about writing this in French. But not today! Yet, I have to caution you that it is in your best interest to really feel comfortable in French prior to starting Bar school. Do not use Bar school (and the reprise) as your opportunity to learn French.

Where to Study

I have to say this is the first thing that threw me off. I had gotten used to accessible libraries that closed really late, but this was not an option with the Barreau. The building itself did not have a nice study room for students; at best we had the option to study in the basement, which was very uninspiring.

The CAIJ, located on the 17th floor of the Montreal Courthouse (1 Notre Dame East), is very close by. It is also really nice (<http://www.caij.qc.ca/pages/NosServices/bibliotheque/coordonnees.aspx?lang=FR-CA#Montreal>). You have a legal library (annotated codes can come in handy), you have large or individual tables, and beautiful views of Montreal. If you like the quiet atmosphere at the Nahum Gelber library, you will love the CAIJ. The biggest problem with the CAIJ is that it closes at 5pm. While this might be good for some people, it didn't really work out for me, at least not as a place to study after classes.

Once in a while I would study at Café Santé Veritas (<http://www.cafesanteveritas.com/>), which is across the street from the Barreau. This café is relatively quiet, except at lunchtime. It boasts tables large enough to fit all your codes and all your annexes.

One place where I really liked to study was the UQAM central library (<http://www.bibliotheques.uqam.ca/informations/adresses/plan.html#cen>). The good thing with the UQAM library is that it is connected to the subway, and has really long hours (8h30-22h00). Plus, they often have really nice exhibits on the way from the subway to the library. I would often go there before or after class.

Of course, all these are just a few places, and everybody has different tastes. Some people love a quiet study place, and some people just can't stand silence. The bottom line is that it's not a bad idea to think about a nice place to study in advance. That way, it won't be a hurdle when you eventually try to study.

Where to Get Your Coffee

When I was studying at the Barreau – and especially when I was taking my exams – I promised myself that if I passed, I would write a few lines about my favourite coffee shop around the Barreau. Now that I have passed, I need to deliver on that promise. Café Santé Veritas is the coffee shop that got me through the Québec Bar School. They make a delicious café latté. Once in a while, I would try Starbucks (<http://tinyurl.com/yfjj99b>—corner of Saint-Laurent and Notre-Dame), Van Houtte Café (20 Notre Dame East) or some of the other places around the Barreau, but the competition’s café latté just tasted like warm milk. If you go there, ask them for one of the nice designs they can ‘draw’ on the top of your coffee. One of my favourites was the swan. And finally, make sure you get the fidelity card.



Where to Eat

There are many places to eat around the Barreau. As you might have guessed, my favourite one was Café Santé Veritas – they have healthy salads and sandwiches. It’s a bit expensive, but really worth it. My favourite was the “Salade orientale avec filet mignon.” Give it a try, and tell me what you think.

Another nice option was Les Cafés Equitasses (150 Notre Dame Est, corner Saint-Vincent). The lunch special includes a soup, a Panini and a coffee (which includes a latté).

If you feel like a not-so-healthy lunch, some people don’t realize that there is a food court which includes an Arahova Souvlaki right in front of the Barreau (<http://www.arahova-souvlaki.ca/locations.html>). I would not go there to study, because it’s very noisy, but it’s a good choice when you have many people not agreeing on one type of food.

Should I mention it? There is a McDonald’s right across the intersection from the Barreau. Sometimes, only a McFlurry will keep you going through the second part of the class.

Where to Get a Treat

If you feel like celebrating your great performance on one of the exams, or want to eat away the pain inflicted by those same exams, there is nothing better than buying a few cupcakes at Les Glaceurs in the Old Port (<http://www.lesglaceurs.ca/>). The store is located a few streets away from the Barreau, and they have some seriously delicious (and fattening) cupcakes. My favourite has to be the Red Velvet cupcake, although I don’t recall any cupcake I did not like over there. Of course, 6 cupcakes will set you back 16 dollars, but those will be the best 16 dollars you’ve ever spent. And if you want to blame anyone

for showing you this place, you can blame Marguerite Tinawi, a fellow Bar student from McGill; she made me discover this place!



Where to Take a Legal Break from Bar School

Once in a while, you get really bored with Bar school. Or, you lose perspective of the real picture – i.e. why are you there. When that happens, it's not a bad idea to cross the street and enter the actual courthouse. It is so close; why not enter one of the courtrooms? We did this during the criminal law module. It helped me put the material I was learning into perspective. What happens when somebody is arrested? Where does the jury sit? How and where does the Crown decide who will be let out while they await trial? It is not only a good way to help visualize what we are learning in class, but it is also a great way to remind us that when we become attorneys, real people with real problems will need our help.

Find a Study Partner

I did the New York Bar just before the Québec Bar, and it was a relatively solitary experience. It was better to study alone, particularly because the study material was designed for self studying. I found the Québec Bar to be just the opposite. It helped to study with someone else. You could bounce ideas off each other, explain something you thought you understood, debate the validity of an old answer, etc. For some of the modules, I worked with some of my classmates. Even though we can't say every minute was a productive minute, overall I learned a lot using that process.

Take “Useful” Classes at McGill

This is generally a good idea, but you have to be aware of the possible risks. Taking Family Law or Secured Transactions¹ while at McGill will certainly open your eyes to various topics you will find on the Bar exam. Therefore, you might want to take some classes at McGill that cover Bar topics. As a side note, the same logic can be applied to people wanting to take the New York Bar: it certainly cannot hurt to take US Constitutional Law while at McGill.

¹ Secured Transactions is Marguerite's number one recommendation.

However, I would not pick my classes at McGill with only the Bar in mind for a few reasons. First, even in the Formation Professionnelle (also known as the 4 month program), you will acquire the minimal knowledge necessary for most if not all of the topics. Therefore, even if you know nothing about a topic (as was my case with family law), you will soon learn the basic concepts. Second, Bar school rarely (if ever) deals with a topic in depth. You will likely learn way more than you really need to at McGill, particularly when it comes to jurisprudence. Third, because this is McGill, you will likely approach topics from “alternative” angles, and that knowledge is useless at the Barreau.

Finally, and this is key, you run the risk of “over thinking” an issue in the exam. You will read a question in the exam, and even though you will know the perfect Bar answer, you will see the little hole in the legal argument. You will add that to your answer. And you will lose all your points. You are sometimes better off knowing less than more. You might think I am kidding, but try to see yourself with a pen, an 8.5 by 14 inch page, and your favourite topic. Would you write only a line, or would you succumb to the temptation to fill up that whole page?

I believe you are much better off taking classes at McGill on topics you enjoy or are curious about. It might not be a bad idea to take a class or two on Bar topics, but don’t overdo it. Bar school will already be long enough, you don’t need another 3 and a half years of bar school preparation.²

Take a Civil Law Only Class at McGill

This one is definitely arguable, but you might be well served by taking a civil law only class at McGill. I never did that (besides the mandatory ones like Civil Law Property), and I took many classes that counted both as Civil law and Common law (such as Secured Transactions, Business Associations, etc.) In hindsight, it might have been helpful to take a highly specialized class that just dealt with the Civil law. Necessary? No. Useful? Certainly.

Enjoy the Ride

There will likely come a time when you will be puzzled, or worse, terribly mad about something that happened during the course of bar school – particularly when it will come to exams. For me, that moment happened after the first exam, when I failed (and still fail) to comprehend why one of my answers, worth 3 points, was wrong. There is a temptation to really get mad about it, and to spend mental cycles being frustrated about this. I have to say that in hindsight, it will not help you much. Of course, you have to learn from your mistakes: you have to readjust your aim when you notice things are not working out. But beyond that, there is a big probability that any frustration or anger will simply hurt your chances of improving or will make your life miserable. Therefore, you will want to keep your eyes on the ball, which means passing the exams.

² On a side note, a recent survey of the Université de Montréal students reveal that a majority of them would like to see a schedule designed with the Barreau in mind. See « Réforme - Résultats du sondage étudiant », *Le Pigeon Dissident*, Volume 33, numéro 6, 17 février 2010 at 3, online at <http://www.pigeondissident.com/publications/show/42>.

Also, some people say that you have to study like crazy to pass. I really would love to see statistics on that. The answers to exam questions are often quite simple. The part that is most difficult is decoding what the examiner is after. Once you do that, the rest can flow quite easily. Therefore, my opinion is that the objective is not to read la Collection de droit from cover to cover or to learn the Civil Code by heart. I think the objective is to have a decent understanding of the material but more importantly, the examination style. As Marguerite said, you have to “become one with the Barreau.” She also adds that you should divorce it as soon as you pass.

I think it’s smart to ensure you do non-Barreau activities during your time there. Go watch that movie you were waiting to see. Enjoy that concert. Finish the book you are reading. Same with the pass-fail workshops like the pleading at the end of the course: these provide a much-needed break from the day-to-day annexes. Have fun doing those. Since you are hopefully only doing this ride once, might as well enjoy it!

I think this concludes my series of articles on the Québec bar. If I can add one more thing, it would be the saying BarBri told us at the end of the New York BarBri classes.

**Do it once
Do it right
Never do it again**

I hope all these articles have been helpful. As I said many times, this is my opinion, so you should use it for what it is worth. Your experience will certainly vary, but I hope that in any event, it will be a great one.

As usual, if you have questions, do not hesitate to email me at narimane.nabahi à (@) mail.mcgill.ca. This article and the previous ones can be found at <http://www.pctechjournal.com/barreau-du-quebec/> . A big thank you to Bénédicte and her Macbook for helping me with this article.