

## CEP Magazine – September 2023



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### Merging passion, experience, and education: A reflection on a master's in compliance

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by Jessica Gauerke, MSL, CCEP, CAMS

Going into 2020, I was a 20-year career securities compliance professional, wondering how my future would look. Then the pandemic hit and brought self-reflection to new levels—rekindling a desire to pursue a genuine passion for advancing myself in a career I loved. Like many, I wondered about my true purpose in life and what I could be doing to make sure I was pointed toward honoring it. Most of the positions I was qualified for and desired required a juris doctorate (JD), even though practicing law wasn't in the job description. As usual, I wondered if there was a compromise, as I had given up the idea of pursuing a law degree 20 years prior. I had focused on raising my two sons and being the best compliance professional I could be.

I recalled meeting Colleen Dorsey, director of the Organizational Ethics and Compliance program at the University of St. Thomas Law School, at a Twin Cities Compliance roundtable event in 2014. I remembered she had some kind of degree program for compliance professionals outside of a JD. Cue up Google. It was a masters in the study of law (MSL). The degree is also called a master of legal studies (MLS) by some law schools. Six years after meeting her, I reached out to Colleen to find out if this was the compromise I was looking for.

Fast forward to May 20, 2023. I donned a very funny hat and led my classmates into the Minneapolis Civic Center ballroom so that we could have equally funny purple hoods bestowed upon our gowned bodies. We were the 2023 MSL graduates of the University of St. Thomas Law School. We were people who chose to invest not only in ourselves and our organizations but in the respectability and honor of our chosen profession in compliance and ethics.

So, what is a MSL, and why is it important to compliance professionals, employers, and the profession itself? Like most, the answer to that question lies in the audience's perception.

#### Balancing a new degree

The decision to pursue higher education is highly personal and relies on a variety of factors, including time, resources, funding, desire, potential opportunities, and competing priorities. Many of my law school cohorts worked full-time and, like me, were also parents, spouses, and involved community members. Potential returning students need to decide if they believe there is going to be a worthy return on investment for an advanced degree. There are other considerations, such as whether other passions and relationships can handle the strain of obligation and mental capacity that a legal studies degree program requires. For me, specifically, it meant wondering what parts of my busy schedule could bend without breaking . . . my kids, their soccer games and speech meets, my need for clean floors, my flower beds, camping, hiking, biking, exercise in general, my burgeoning stained-glass hobby, political interests, pets, or date nights with my husband? In the end, I traded in

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the flower beds, the stained glass, politics, quite a few date nights, plenty of soccer games, and exercise for five semesters of online classes, the flowy black gown, and a funny hat. It was worth it to me. I wondered if other graduates outside my program thought the same.

I reached out via LinkedIn to another recent MSL graduate—Morgan Paugh from Fordham University School of Law—for his thoughts on making the decision to return to school while working full-time. “This is basically a part-time job. I wish I would have been more prepared for the mental lift and the need to get really good at prioritizing.” Paugh also recommended making a good old-fashioned pros/cons list if you are considering an advanced degree. Consider what you really like about the work that you already do, the field or industry, and what you think could happen if you pursued the idea.

On the contrary, also consider if your personal relationships and other passions will have room for competing priorities. Paugh added, “Going to school online the first semester felt like being on an island. I was really hoping the cost and effort would be worth it in the end. Eventually, I found a way to manage my time in a way that allowed me to finish the program successfully.”

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