A Trend in Going to Law School

By Andrew Evans December 5, 2010 at 6:49PM

Law schools across the country are rethinking the way that law is taught as the legal profession has continued to change. The University of Colorado has undertaken the challenge to better prepare its students by gearing them towards participating in a global, competitive, and business-like environment.

In 2007, William Sullivan of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching released a crucial report claiming that, while the Socratic-style case dialogue promoted at schools teaches students to effectively analyze the law, real-world experience is lagging.

"The relative marginality of clinical training at law schools is striking," Sullivan wrote in the report. "Learning, then, entails embarking on an effort to gradually grow into the complex abilities of an expert. This is where the idea of apprenticeship enters."

Law schools including those at the University of Miami and Seattle University almost immediately began supplementing their current teaching method. The University of Seattle School of Law implemented a system of performance tracking that allows students to choose classes based on their strengths and weakness and the University of Miami recently offered a stipend to graduates who work for free in government programs.

Michele DeStefano Beardslee of the University of Miami along with lawyers, professors and deans from three countries are leading the charge in forming a first of its kind program aimed at turning students into legal entrepreneurs. The project, 'Law without Laws', will launch in January in conjunction with six schools including Harvard and Peking University in China.

Students from each school will meet with mentors such as Hugh Totten, a founder of the Valorem Law Group, and entrepreneur Michael Greenberg and attend lectures on topics ranging from technology to billing and outsourcing while being tasked with coming up with new ways to improve legal education and the profession of law. In the second year, students will communicate with each other through a virtual Second-Life style environment to share ideas.

"Business students their same age are doing the same thing," DeStefano Beardslee said. "If their ideas are being implemented why can't law students become innovators too?"

DeStefano hopes that the program will impart the skills necessary to participate in the modern global legal economy as well.

"In today's world it is no longer feasible to just practice law," DeStefano Beardslee said. "Students need to have business skills since the line between business and law is now murky."

While first year students will continue to spend their days studying rigorously for their first

tests and classes under the current case-based teaching method, the University of Colorado School of Law embraced the trend as well.

In order to broaden student's perception of the legal profession, the university has implemented the Telos Project. The project organizes 25 students to reflect on their chosen path in a non-credit, reading intensive course.

"The Telos Project is a small group seminar designed to engage law students in conversation about the behavioral and ethical dimensions of their legal training and prepare them for the legal profession," University of Colorado Law School Vice Dean Dayna Matthew said.

The University of Colorado has embraced other changes to its curriculum as well. First year students may now take an elective in their second semester and a new "Legislation and Regulation" class was created.

First year students can tackle a course, "in religion, advanced torts, advanced civil litigation, or others that continue their studies," Matthews said.

The courses are aimed at preparing students for all aspects of practicing law.

"We hope that students will be analytically as well as ethically able to compete in an ever changing and highly competitive environment," Matthews said. "Students need to be able to practice law with civility and professionalism, not just litigate."

Certain students will even gain hands on experience beyond internships and clerkships.

"Students who have completed basic courses in gender law will be able to compare family law in the US and India," Matthews said.

The new courses and opportunities are not an attempt to replace the current teaching method.

"The old method will be enhanced and broadened," Matthews said. "We are still teaching people to think like lawyers."

The law school will continue to enhance its curriculum.

"We are currently developing innovative third year law classes that would go past the learning students obtain in their second year," Matthews said