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No more pencils, no more books

DePaul's new '3YP' program gets students out of the classroom and into the real world

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During the summer following his first year at the University of Michigan Law School, David A. Rodriguez cut grass.

This was unexpected. Rodriguez had signed up with a housing rights organization and, though he was happy to pitch in wherever was needed, he figured his time there would focus on, well, the law.

"I don't know if it was because there wasn't more legal work to do, but I spent a lot of time doing more manual labor, upkeep of the various properties that they were managing for low-income people," Rodriguez said.

It wasn't all manual labor. He did spend some time on legal tasks, like reviewing documents. And after a year of law school, mowing the lawn was surprisingly peaceful.

He also knew finding a good internship during his second summer would be more important than whatever he did during his first.

Still, the lack of intensive legal work following that first year of legal studies felt like a missed opportunity for growth.

It's a feeling that stuck with him throughout his career, first with Sidley, Austin LLP, then with the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago and now as a professor at DePaul University College of Law.

And it's a reason school officials believe he's an ideal director for DePaul's new Third Year in Practice program (3YP).

"He himself has experience in both the nonprofit and the for-profit sectors," said DePaul law professor and program creator Allison Tirres. "He had already demonstrated himself to be an excellent clinical instructor. And he clearly has a lot of enthusiasm about innovation and legal education.

"With all of those things given his background and experience and capabilities as an administrator, we were supportive of his being chosen to be the director."

Launching in the fall, the program will, as Rodriguez put it, "demystify the practice of law" by putting students through a practice-based third year.

The idea is full-immersion law — no different from a person who moves to France to learn French.

"That's our approach with this program," Rodriguez said. "If you immerse yourself for an entire year doing skills-oriented (work), you're going to already have the mindset (upon graduation) of an attorney who has already been practicing for a few years."

The new curriculum is the brainchild of a group of DePaul professors led by Tirres. Like all law schools, DePaul was looking for new ways to prepare students for their careers and give them marketable, practice-ready skills.

The 3YP program, modeled in part after a similar program at Washington and Lee University School of Law in Virginia, was their solution.

Here's how it works.

Students can apply for the program following their first semester. If accepted, the classroom work that would generally be spread between the second and third year will be pushed to the second year.

This leaves the third year open for externships and clinics. In order to create even more time for out-of-classroom learning, the program has increased the school's allotted out-of-classroom credits from 12 to 21, a total that keeps it within American Bar Association regulations.

While clinic work does not count as being out of the classroom, both the clinics and externships will give students opportunities to work with real clients and be supervised by mentors.

"Students will be spearheading the actual representation of clients," Rodriguez said. "They're the point-people for talking to the clients, interviewing the clients and witnesses (and) talking to opposing clients. And if they have their 711 (limited law license), certainly I will have a few students who will be doing oral arguments or trial work."

On the transactional side, students will work with professor Julie D. Lawton to negotiate contracts for clients. The program's combination of litigation and transaction work will, Rodriguez said, create a "cross-fertilization" of skills necessary for all attorneys.

While the externships are still being selected, the program will offer



David A. Rodriguez



Allison Tirres

nine clinics, including immigration and asylum, civil rights, criminal appeals and family law.

The 3YP's third year will also include a weekly course on professional skills. Though the syllabus is not yet solidified, the proposed subject areas include fact investigation, conceptualization of legal issues and case theories, strategies for self-learning, case management and development strategies and deposition-taking and defense.

The weekly course is designed to give students time for reflection and discussion. Part of the process will involve lots of reading, with a focus on briefs rather than complaints or opinions since that's what most will be writing as lawyers.

That way, rather than using reading time for opinions to build theoretical skills, students will spend those hours soaking up the style and substance of brief writing — thus building practical skills.

"We're going to increase the amount of legal writing that they are going to be reading," Rodriguez said, who wants students reading 20 to 30 briefs during their third year. "We think that in reading or seeing good writing, you're able to assimilate that."

The new program is the latest in a series of initiatives taken by Illinois law schools to create practice-ready graduates for a job market that no longer wants to provide on-the-job training for young lawyers.

Northern Illinois University College of Law launched two new clinics in 2013. In December, Loyola University Chicago School of Law announced a new curriculum in which all students will complete "at least two experiential learning opportunities" in a combination of clinics,

externships and courses.

In January, IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law launched its Praxis Program, which gives graduates a certificate in practice-ready professional skills. Northwestern University School of Law offers experiential learning opportunities including its intensive semester practicum, while The John Marshall Law School requires all students to take 18 hours of experiential learning.

To Tirres, DePaul's new program gives students a progression to their experiential learning.

"By participating in the program, the third year can become more of a capstone experience," Tirres said. "Ideally students would realize that their second year is the best time to be taking those foundational courses that they need. And then in the third year they can build on that by getting more out into the field."

It's a program that Rodriguez would have appreciated when he was a student. He believes it's easy for law students to graduate essentially out of balance, with an overflow of intellectual material and a dearth of practical skills.

"When I got out of law school myself, I was hazy and muddled about how things work on the ground floor," Rodriguez said.

His hope is that the 3YP program resets those scales so that by the time students graduate, "they are not weighed down by all of the new things they have to do both procedural and substantive."

In the event that graduates encounter any landscaping demands at their new job, they will need additional instruction. For everything else, Rodriguez and Tirres believe they've got students covered.