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DePaul 3L program preps for practice

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When DePaul University College of Law student Sara Dankowski was scouting potential externship opportunities last year to fulfill the school's requirements to participate in its Third Year in Practice (3YP) program, no one was holding her hand.

Like the typical job hunt for a law school graduate, it was largely up to her to line up where she wanted to work. When she secured a position externing at a firm where she had previously clerked, she said the firm had no problem allowing her to put in extra hours to count as school credit.

"I think they were just upset I wasn't here 40 hours a week," she said.

Dankowski is a part of the school's inaugural group of students to graduate this spring after completing the 3YP program. Students who enroll in the program take courses that focus on experiential learning, including working in clinics, legal drafting and practicum courses, then spend the bulk of their third year working in a field placement.

That experience involves a job similar to an externship tailored to their career interests.

During those placements, many of the students spend up to 40 hours a week at private practices and public offices.

"They're pretty much perceived as employees," said program director David A. Rodriguez. "After they do their intensive externships, when I talk to them, it's like talking to a colleague. That's what made me the most happy and proud of them."

The goal of the program is to immerse students in lawyering skills, giving them more hands-on experience outside the classroom to help them be practice-ready once they pass the bar.

The program was created by DePaul professors who modeled it after a similar program at Washington and Lee University School of Law in Virginia.

While DePaul isn't alone among law schools focused on creating new ways to help their graduates be ready to start practicing the day they start at their respective jobs, Rodriguez said 3YP is unique in its emphasis on students getting as much experiential learning as possible during the students' final year.

Rodriguez, who meets with the 3YP students each week during their externships, said he's noticed how his students have grown professionally as a result of experience that imitates a full-time job.

"The amazing thing about this program is that all of [them] matured both personally and professionally much more than I anticipated going into the program," he said.

There were 11 students in the first cohort graduating this spring after participating in the program this school year. Although many more students were interested, Rodriguez said the school decided to start small. Next year, 15 students are on tap to participate.

When the school approved the program in 2013, Rodriguez said the American Bar Association required students to earn at least three credit hours of experiential learning credits, which Rodriguez said he doesn't think is enough. That requirement has since been bumped up to six credits, but Rodriguez said he thinks it should be increased further.

3YP students must complete at least 24 credit hours of experiential courses, including field placements.

At the time the program was first proposed, some DePaul faculty members had reservations about taking students out of the classroom for much of their third year. Their concerns centered on whether being outside the classroom would impact their ability to pass the bar exam. To alleviate that concern, Rodriguez said the program included a focus on

bar passage strategies.

"The vast majority of faculty said let's give this a shot, and I'm certainly glad that they did, because I tell the dean and I tell the students that ... everyone is saying hey, this is really the way to go out, this is the way to finish your third year," he said.

Rodriguez said he's enjoyed seeing students come out of their placements ready for legal practice.

"That's the point of the program. Get them excited, get them competent and build their confidence, and they all have told me that their confidence levels and their competency levels have significantly increased," he said.

While Dankowski sought out her externship, some of the students went through Rodriguez for help. In the case of student Clint Pierce, he turned to Rodriguez to line up an externship with the U.S. Attorney's Office, where he worked in the fall before moving to an externship at the Cook County State's Attorney's Office this semester.

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Pierce chose to enroll at DePaul because he heard about the development of the 3YP program, which he said struck him as an opportunity to make himself more competitive in the job market after school. He called Rodriguez to discuss the program before choosing to enroll at the school.

"It worked out perfectly, because what I want to do is trial work, and I know that as a young attorney graduating law school, to actually get trial experience is hard, it's rare, you're usually sitting behind a mentor for years before you see a courtroom," Pierce said. "I knew that I wanted to fast-track myself to a trial position right away and that it requires an

experience outside the normal book, legal work in the classroom."

Pierce said he hopes it will give him a leg up in the job market.

"It was challenging in terms of ... you're pretty much in the real world," he said. "It was a lot of work, but the good thing about the program was that it was my chosen work. I'm not getting busy work to get done. It had an objective, and it was more enjoyable knowing it served a purpose that I wanted."

"The Third Year in Practice program, it's the way that all law schools should eventually be. It should be more like a medical school, where you spend a year or two years in a practice. You shouldn't be walking out of law school the last day having read a billion books and never said a word in court. That's backwards," he said.

Dankowski had a few field-placement opportunities when she signed up for the program in her second year.

She ended up working during the fall semester with Rathbun, Cservenyak & Kozol LLC in her hometown of Joliet. She took three night classes while working at the firm most of the week. This spring, she was able to stay with the firm through an additional externship outside of the 3YP program.

"I felt that honestly, kind of looking at this from a more vocational approach, spending a year as immersed in practice as I can while it still being a part of my coursework allowed me to dive more into that," she said. "Everybody works as a clerk at some point ... but 10 to 12 hours a week isn't enough to learn something. That's a project a week. I would get multiple projects a day, and I think I learned more about trying to balance a workload by being here more often."

"I felt I was treated very similar to a second-year associate here," she said.