

LAW SCHOOL NOTES

DePaul law class gives students a sense of the real world

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Julie Lawton

The first time Thibaut Giret and Jason Whitehead II sat down and met their client, the client brought another person to the meeting. They weren't expecting that.

"For us, that was a surprise, because usually you have confidentiality with your client," said Giret, a third-year student at the DePaul University College of Law.

"The fact that he came with someone else creates confidentiality issues, so we got to deal with that, even though we were supposed to explain the business and [intellectual property] aspect of his project," he said.

Giret and Whitehead's experience encapsulates the kind of learning the students are doing in the inaugural class of DePaul's Business Law Clinic. Law schools typically teach classes that involve one topic — a property tax law class will be about property law, said Julie Lawton, a clinical professor of law who runs the Business Law Clinic.

But at the clinic, students are learning these legal issues collide. The person Giret and Whitehead's client brought to the meeting might be a business partner — that raises ethical questions for them, Lawton said. Or maybe the person isn't authorized to work in the United States — that raises immigration and employment law questions.

"For a law student, where they learn these subject matters in silos, it's a very different experience," Lawton said. "Because of the practice of law, you deal with all of these issues simultaneously."

Anthony McCloud, a second-year law student, contrasted their work in the clinic with a typical law class: "It's not just you get the answer and you lose points on the exam. If you do something wrong, it could actually have an effect on somebody's life."

"[The clinic] makes you become more invested in the process and the program," McCloud added.

As part of the Business Law Clinic, eight students pair up and work with a client for a year in an effort to help the businesses they're advising become self-sustaining. The students are only working on transactional issues and not litigation, Lawton said.

All the clients are from the Coleman Entrepreneurship Center in DePaul's Driehaus College of Business and Kellstadt Graduate School of Business. The entrepreneurs in that program have some kind of connection to DePaul; typically, the owners are DePaul students, alumni or former teachers.

For the clinic's first year, Lawton whittled 32 applications down to eight students. She chose the first class based on a combination of grades, undergraduate major and prior business experience. Some of the students had some experience with intellectual property; another student ran his own accounting firm at one point.

"Clearly, there is significant demand among students, so it was very competitive," Lawton said, adding that she will not take repeat students.

Whitehead, a third-year law student, said he applied for the clinic because he found that law schools in general do not provide a lot of classes for students interested in transactional business law.

"A lot of the classes that are available to us deal with more litigation-based practice areas and litigation-based training," Whitehead said.

"There is a limit on those of us who are into the transactional areas of law. I want to pursue that area of law," he said.