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## Training 'client-ready' students

Chicago-Kent experiential learning program aims to offer real-world legal skills training

BY JACK SILVERSTEIN  
*Law Bulletin staff writer*

Think back to Stanley Kubrick's "A Clockwork Orange," the scene where the protagonist, Alex, lays in a police department holding cell. He stares defiantly at the officers who have beat him and says he won't speak without his lawyer.

"I know the law," he sneers.

The inspector looks down at him. "We'll have to show our little friend Alex here that we know the law too," he says, "but that knowing the law isn't everything."

The problem for little Alex? While familiar with doctrinal aspects of the law, he lacked knowledge on the law's practical application.

He could have used the new Praxis Program at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law.

Launching in the fall, the experiential learning program aims to train students in practical skills.

"We're facing a time of economic uncertainty and, as has been widely reported, there are fewer appealing jobs for our students," said Chicago-Kent Dean Harold J. Krent. "We needed to think of a way to position our students as best we could to meet the challenges of this ever-evolving job environment."

With the job market shrinking for new lawyers and clients less willing to pay firms for, among

other services, the on-the-job training of associates that was common prior to the recession, firms are hiring fewer new lawyers.

"What we hear is generic concerns (from alumni) about 'Are students client-ready?'" said Sarah Harding, a Chicago-Kent associate professor. "You can know how to draft a great memo, but if you don't know how to interview a client, you're not client-ready."

In order to create "client-ready" graduates, the Praxis Program — named after the Latin word that distinguishes practice from theory — will place a framework around 25 pre-existing courses that train students in a list of core competencies, such as interviewing clients, networking and understanding the new roles of technology in the law.

"The idea of focusing on competencies instead of discrete experiential classes — 'What are you capable of doing when you come out of law school?' not just 'what you know' — is something that has been out there in the press and cutting-edge legal scholarship about preparing students for practice," Harding said.

"We decided to see if we could incorporate that idea of competencies into our program."

There are four steps to earning the Praxis certificate. Students must complete 24

credit hours within the 25 courses; complete a list of required practice-based experiences, such as case development and management, client advocacy and group work skills; create an online portfolio and profile; and complete the "Practice and Professionalism" course in the third year of law school, the only class created specifically for the program.

It's a program that interests Alexander "Sasha" Kakabadse, a third-year student and president of Chicago-Kent's Student Bar Association.

"My role ... is to liaise between the faculty and administration and the student body," Kakabadse said. "So when a program like this comes about ... they ask me to pull together student opinion."

The response was overwhelmingly positive.

"Chicago-Kent has always been good at (experiential learning) before this program," Kakabadse said. "(The program) provides a way for students to package that experience in a job interview.

"The program itself allows you to capture the intangibles, and allows you to structure your time in law school to pursue experiential offerings that will make you a better attorney day one."

Chicago-Kent isn't the only Illinois law school reacting to the changing job market. Northern Illinois University College of Law offers experiential learning in clinics and externships, including two new ones — the Medical-Legal Partnership Clinic and the Foreclosure Mediation Clinic.

In December, Loyola University Chicago School of Law announced a new model curriculum in which all law students will complete "at least two experiential learning opportunities" in a combination of clinics, externships and courses.

The John Marshall Law School requires all students to take 18 hours of experiential learning. And DePaul University College of Law has its own experiential learning program in the works, which has yet to be announced.



Sarah Harding



Katharine K. Baker



Harold J. Krent

To Krent, the Chicago-Kent program stands out.

"What I think is unique here is breaking down legal education (to) make sure that students are

exposed to the other recognized attributes of what it takes to be a successful lawyer," he said.

Chicago-Kent professor Katharine K. Baker adds that the program acknowledges the difference between being a good law student and being a good lawyer.

"Research makes clear that many of the most successful lawyers were not particularly stellar law students," Baker said.

"This program provides a way for students, regardless of how well they do in doctrinal courses, to shine in some of the areas that are critical for being good

lawyers."

The school is currently looking to fill a new leadership position to oversee the program. Students seeking to join, meanwhile, must apply by Jan. 24.

It's a program that the soon-to-graduate Kakabadse would have loved to apply for.

"All law schools offer experiential offerings," he said. "I think the question is, how ready are those students to practice compared to other students preparing for the same job? ... I think this certificate is a way to empower students to market that depth of experience."