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The future is now

In Chicago-Kent class, 30 professors and legal professionals teach evolving practice methods

BY JACK SILVERSTEIN

Law Bulletin staff writer

What can planning a vacation teach you about practicing law?

As students at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law found out, plenty.

In Practice and Professionalism, the first course designed specifically for the law school's new practice-ready certificate program, students are working with 30 professors and legal professionals to learn about evolving practice methods and technologies in three areas: small to midsize law firms, Big Law and nonprofits.

"We do a pretty deep look at the demographics and the market and the structure of those three types of practices, with a special lens on how technology is changing the way lawyers and clients are interacting," said IIT Chicago-Kent professor Ronald W. Staudt.

Prior to the recession, law firms more frequently instructed new associates in practical skills such as interviewing clients and managing a case load.

Now, with clients less willing to pay firms to train new lawyers, that responsibility is being pushed back onto law schools.

That trend has led to expanded emphasis in legal education on clinics, externships, internships and simulation-based courses — all known as "experiential learning."

At IIT Chicago-Kent, that emphasis resulted in the Praxis Program, named after the Latin word that distinguishes practice from theory.

Students take 24 experiential learning credit hours from a bundle

of 36 practical skills courses to earn a certificate that shows employers their proficiency in what's known as practice-ready or client-ready skills.

"(Staudt's) class, in my opinion, adds more than just practical application of legal principles," third-year student Nicholas Bartzen said. "This class takes practical application and marries it with a bird's-eye view of the legal industry in this century."

Bartzen and two other students currently in the course came away impressed by a series of presentations during the Big Law segment from two Seyfarth, Shaw LLP attorneys focused on using technology to improve legal practices.

The lawyers taught students about "SeyfarthLean," the firm's package of client-centric methods used to deliver legal services.

"All the sections that we taught on were things you wouldn't traditionally find taught in a law school," said Seyfarth attorney and IIT Chicago-Kent alumnus Andrew M. Baker.

"This class takes practical application and marries it with a bird's-eye view of the legal industry in this century."

"These are stones that are left unturned, and we would say kudos to Chicago-Kent for trying to expose their students to more innovative ways of looking at the practice of law."

Despite different career goals, students Bartzen, Lydia Ness and Andrew Sharp all found value in the

Seyfarth presentations last month.

They were particularly moved by the portion that Baker and fellow Seyfarth attorney and IIT Chicago-Kent alumnus Andrew P. Medeiros taught involving "process mapping," a flow chart created with Post-it notes that guides clients step-by-step through the legal process.

That's where the vacation-planning activity came in.

To teach students about process mapping, Baker and Medeiros asked students to plan a vacation.

Or, more specifically, to consciously examine what is often a rote process.

"Everything has a process around it, whether you're actively thinking about it while you're doing it or not," Medeiros said. "What we taught the students to do in this session was to seek out that process, define the process and then refine the process to improve it and make it better."

Ness, a second-year student who wants to work in public interest law, initially thought the exercise sounded "silly." She soon saw the purpose.

"We've all planned trips," Ness said. "It seems so trivial, but maybe you haven't sat down and thought, 'Is there a way you can simplify this process? Is there something we are not thinking about?' Because a lot of people go on vacation and end up forgetting something."

Sharp is a second-year student who wants to develop digital tools that can assist access to justice work. He appreciated learning how a large, corporate law firm operates as well as the firm's use of technology.

"We didn't have anyone that was quite like Seyfarth," Sharp said about the slate of presenters.

"The size, and the extent to which they are integrating technology. They said, 'If our law firm can do this stuff, anyone can do this, because we do everything everywhere.'"

Bartzen also noticed that mutability. He wants to work at a small to midsize firm doing real estate law for condominium rentals and purchases and currently works as a clerk at Kovitz, Shifrin, Nesbit, a 14-attorney firm specializing in condo law.

"The real treat of it is that, myself, I have no interest in Big Law, but I still obtained this enor-



Ronald W. Staudt



Andrew P. Medeiros



Andrew M. Baker

mously valuable lesson from these presentations," he said. "They taught me something that is applicable to me for the rest of my career as a lawyer."

Sharp agreed.

"Professor Staudt is willing to look to the future," Sharp said. "This could be the future, what Seyfarth is doing."

jsilverstein@lbpc.com