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# Concentrations allow specialized study

When University at Buffalo President William R. Greiner conferred J.D.s at the UB School of Law's commencement in May, 50 graduates came away with something extra.

For the first time, UB Law awarded special certificates to those completing the requirements of the school's concentrations, the recently developed sequences that allow students to specialize in specific areas of law. The concentration certificates attested to intensive study in one of five two-year programs: Affordable Housing and Community Development, Corporate Finance and Business Transactions, Criminal Law, Environmental Law, or Family Law. Fall 1997/spring 1998 saw the introduction of three additional concentrations: Regulatory Law and Policy, Law and Social Justice, and International Law. More may be added in the future.

"The whole point is to provide a cohesive package to people," says Associate Professor Michael J. Meurer, who heads the Regulatory Law concentration.

"It gives students an opportunity to tailor their educational experience in accordance with their interests," explains R. Nils Olsen, vice dean for academic affairs and director of clinical studies. "It's the centerpiece of the upper-division New Curriculum," he adds, referring to the Law School's newly implemented orientation toward classes and programs that focus upon traditional legal theory, social context and the practices of lawyers.

The concentrations have been developing for several years, but 1997 graduates were the first to receive certificates in formal recognition of their work.

One of those graduates was Rosalie A. Melisz, who took the Corporate

Finance and Business Transactions concentration. In late summer, she started work in the corporate department of Damon and Morey in Buffalo. "I'm doing what I wanted," she says. The concentration aroused some interest during early discussions with her new employers. "Certainly in interviews they asked me about it," she recalls, "about the courses I took, and what the concentration was all about."

Concentrations are about several things. Primarily, they are about specializing in a way that hasn't been possible under the traditional law school curriculum. "It enhances the marketability of a degree from UB," says Associate Clinical Professor Thomas F. Disare, who is in charge of the Corporate Finance and Business Transactions concentration with Professor John Henry Schlegel.

Each concentration has its own requirements, but they all involve one or more basic courses followed by a sequence of more narrowly focused upper-level courses. The Affordable Housing and Community Development concentration, for example, starts with 15 credits in "context courses," such as Corporate Tax and Land Use Planning. An additional nine credits must be taken in such upper-level courses as Acquisition Transactions and Nonprofit Corporations. After the courses, all concentrations also require students to take a third-year Colloquium, which generally includes researching and writing a publication-quality project.

"The concentration is designed to integrate teaching, scholarship and practice so that students gain an in-depth understanding of a particular area of law," says Professor Peter R. Pitegoff,

who is in charge of the Affordable Housing concentration. The concentration, an extension of the Law School's older Affordable Housing and Community Development program, was the first to be implemented, because many of its components were already in place when the New Curriculum began. Those components include clinics and the American Bar Association's Journal of Affordable Housing and Community



Associate Professor Susan V. Mangold

Development Law, which was placed at UB Law in 1995.

"There's a very explicit aim to generate scholarship, research and policy analysis drawing from our work in the field," Pitegoff says. "Out of any concentration, students get the experience of exploring a particular subject area in depth. It's built around problem solving. Rather than skating along the surface with survey courses, they get to grapple with issues and get down deep. They also get to spend extended time with writing, hopefully for publication. A

PHOTO: K. C. KRANTZ

number of students have published work they did in the concentration.”

Students who completed the concentration have done well. “Several are in large law firms, several are in policy work for the federal or state governments,” Pitegoff says. “Some are in labor law for unions, some are in legal services. It’s really quite a variety. ... Many just do it (the concentration) and then go on to something quite different.”

That’s because the concentrations are about more than just specialization for specialization’s sake.

Before graduating in May, Anita C. Costello went through the Affordable Housing concentration and edited the *ABA Affordable Housing Journal*. She has since taken a job with Hodgson, Russ, Andrews, Woods & Goodyear. “I’ll be working mostly in pension and employee benefits, some international

Economic Development clinics. “It was an opportunity to work closely with professors in a small setting and in a mentoring situation, which doesn’t happen in large classes,” Costello recalls. “For some students, that never comes, but the clinic is particularly suited to that type of experience. It humanizes the law school experience. And it gave me self-confidence, working in the field. It was my first real legal experience.”

Disare agrees that the value of concentrations goes beyond specialized knowledge. “One of the problems with making the transition from law school to practice these days is that with the economics of legal practice students don’t get a chance to observe things anymore,” he says. “We’re trying to fill the gap with these kinds of experiences. And in a concentration, by the time you finish it you should feel like the faculty are mentors to you. That’s what’s missing in many law school resumes. That’s much more important than the particular subject matter.”

The subject matter, nevertheless, is intensive. Melisz remembers Acquisitions Transactions, in which students grapple with about 300 pages of documents from a complex buyout deal. “It was a little daunting at first,” she recalls. “It’s so voluminous, you wonder if you’ll ever understand what it’s all about. But you do, over the course of about eight weeks.”

The documents are from Disare’s own files. In 1986, he represented a senior bank lender in the leveraged buyout of Columbus-McKinnon Corp., a chain and hoist manufacturer with headquarters in Amherst and operations around the world. The buyout, which has been credited with leaving the company strong and locally controlled, involved an intricate financing package and months of negotiation.

“You get a lot of numbers you have to sort through,” Disare says. Students review non-legal business documents before going on to loan agreements, legal opinions and merger papers involved in the buyout.

“There is a lot of angst for young practitioners,” notes Disare. “For instance, when someone hands you a 100-page document and asks what you think, or even worse — when someone asks you to draft a 100-page document.

What we do is slow down the mental processes of an experienced practitioner and feed it to them in digestible bites. We’re teaching the process of participating in this practice.”

To lend an additional element of authenticity, Donald McPhee, Disare’s old client, and Robert Montgomery, Columbus-McKinnon executive vice president, came in and spoke to the class. Future classes will probably see the executives’ presentation on videotape, but Disare may invite them back to answer questions.

“The best thing about that course and the transactions seminar I took, which took it to the next level, was the practical aspects and the personalities involved,” Melisz says. “We talked a lot about how lawyers need to know what motivates people and how we can be most effective at structuring a transaction, digging beneath the surface and talking about the real world and real people.”

Each concentration draws on a variety of faculty members, and some utilize the same courses. Among the six faculty involved in Corporate Finance and Business Transactions is Professor John Henry Schlegel, who shares the Acquisitions Transactions lectern with Disare. “We’re trying to get students to understand not just the substance, but also a way of thinking about client problems,” he says. “There’s a wonderful story about a student who once said to a faculty member, ‘Is this something we’re supposed to know or an example of something else?’ The concentration is both. It’s something you’re supposed to know, but it also gives you some understanding of how to deal with non-litigation issues.”

The capstone of each concentration is a colloquium, which typically involves a significant research project along with other activities. Concentrations in programs that have law journals, such as Criminal Law and Affordable Housing, require students to write or edit articles.

“It’s pretty intense,” says Associate Professor Susan V. Mangold, who is in charge of the Family Law concentration. Students who complete the required courses must apply for acceptance to the Family Law colloquium, where they are expected to produce and present a research paper. Other work includes

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law and some tax,” she says.

“I don’t think it really matters whether you go into that particular field,” she adds of the concentration. “It’s the opportunity to explore something in depth. You see how things fit together and you begin to see patterns. I’m not going to work in that field, but I think it was the most worthwhile experience of law school.”

She particularly enjoyed the Affordable Housing and Community

assignments based on reviewing papers and hearing practitioner presentations about cases in areas such as interstate adoption and property settlements. Students also spend several days with a family law judge, the judge's clerk and a law guardian.

"After completing the colloquium I think they feel as though they are leaving law school with some expertise in a particular substantive area," Mangold says. "Whether or not they go into family law, they have delved very deeply into cutting-edge issues as well as dealt with the day-to-day issues. Otherwise, law school can be a smattering of so many substantive areas. This way they can leave with a refined understanding of a large area of law."

The concentrations are still evolving. Some that do not already have a full-year colloquium are expanding that component. The Finance Transactions concentration is developing closer ties with the School of Management. The Criminal Law concentration has added a federal criminal law clinic. The new Regulatory Law and Policy concentration plans to bring in alumni practicing in regulatory law and work cooperatively with the Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy. And the Law School expects to continue adding new concentrations in the future, possibly in areas such as litigation.

Olsen says the concentrations remain fairly unusual among American law schools. "Parts of it may exist at other schools, but it isn't the norm," he says. "And it's not for everybody. You don't have to do this in order to benefit from the educational process at UB Law. But it's an option if you have a strong interest."

As demanding as the concentrations are, they do not preclude students from indulging their curiosity in other areas. "You definitely have the time to take all the courses you want in other fields," says Frank J. Jacobson, a third-year student in the Criminal Law concentration. But, he adds, the time spent in the concentration provides a structure and sense of accomplishment that might otherwise be missed. "Instead of aimlessly wandering through your law school career you can tailor your education for yourself," he says. "And you get out of here with something more than just a degree." ■

## New Mentor Program builds community

BY SUSAN R. BURCH '00

When first-year law student Maria Mitsios moved to Buffalo last fall from California, she had never been to Western New York before. "It was a little intimidating to move across the country by myself to start law school," Mitsios says. "I met a few students, but I still had many questions about school and finding my way around."

Then one day, Mitsios received a letter in her mailbox from law Professor Errol Meidinger inviting her to meet with him and a small group of other first-year students. The professor wanted to get together to discuss how the first year was going, to answer any questions and to offer some advice — not just about being a law student, but about living in the Buffalo community. Meidinger is Mitsios' mentor, and participates in a new faculty/student mentoring program implemented this past fall at the Law School.

"I was so impressed when I read the letter," says Mitsios. "It was a real relief to have a faculty adviser around to give me advice and guidance through what sometimes seemed like a maze."

Created over the summer by Vice Dean R. Nils Olsen, the idea of the mentoring program is to make the first year more comfortable and welcoming. Mentors give students someone they can turn to for advice — someone who knows their name and can make the law school experience less daunting. With the more complex New Curriculum in place,

Olsen thought it was important that the first-year students be given an opportunity to get to know UB Law faculty or staff on a personal level — and not necessarily one of their professors.

"I felt that giving each student a mentor would be a good way to humanize the first-year experience and make it interpersonal. This is something that is very hard to accomplish in classes of 100 students."

Olsen sent out letters to all of the faculty asking for volunteer mentors. The response was overwhelming. More than 30 faculty and staff members signed up for the opportunity to get to know the first-year class. Students were then randomly matched with mentors. Within the first few weeks of school, contact was made.

A goal of the program is to have the mentors meet with their group of students at least once during each semester in an informal setting, such as dinner or lunch, where they could sit down and just talk about anything that was on their minds. Ideally, the mentors would be able to alleviate some of the students' anxieties during the fall semester and give advice on registering for their second year during the spring semester.

Professor Jim Atleson agrees that the mentoring program is a great idea. In the past he had taught first-year students, but in recent years he missed that contact. "The first-year students seem to be excited about learning something new. There is a sense of discovery about them that is very energizing," he says.