Cracking the Penal Code: Criminal Law Center Launches Master's Degree Program

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Cracking the penal code

Buffalo Criminal Law Center launches a master's degree program

Professor Markus Dubber, left, with LL.M. candidates Antonia Rodriguez '99 and Corinna Schüenemann '99
"It is not enough to just go to the legislature and say we need better laws."

One of a kind. That is the boast that UB Law School's new master of laws (LL.M.) program in criminal law can make. Among U.S. law schools, UB is the only one to offer this yearlong post-professional criminal-law program.

"Criminal lawyers, prosecutors and defense attorneys alike, don't get the respect they deserve," said Dubber, who also directs the Buffalo Criminal Law Center at UB Law School. "People do not take it seriously as an area of law. It is not enough to just go to the legislature and say we need better laws. We need to change the way it is taught and the way it is practiced. This program is an ambitious undertaking for the Law School. Obviously I would like to train good lawyers for the Buffalo legal community, but I hope that eventually we would make an impact on the state and national levels."

The LL.M. program, which began this academic year with 10 students, is designed for those who already hold the J.D. degree. Dubber said the master's program would be attractive to:

- People who want to practice criminal law and think an advanced degree in the subject increases their chances of getting a better job in the field.
- People who are interested in an academic career in criminal law.
- Foreign students who are seeking exposure to American criminal law.

In the future, he said, practicing lawyers who want to pursue continuing education may also enter the program.

"I feel confident in saying there is no other school in the country that can rival our criminal law curriculum in variety or scope," Dubber said. "Under the leadership of Dean Olsen, UB has expanded its curriculum to include both nuts-and-bolts courses, including classes on plea bargaining, sentencing and jury selection, and courses that explore the theoretical aspects of criminal law."

Students in the LL.M. program may write a thesis and can participate in the Criminal Law Clinic. They participate in the Buffalo Criminal Law Center's myriad projects and activities, including an annual conference on criminal law that brings leading experts to the school to tackle a central issue; the Buffalo Criminal Law Review, one of the leading journals nationally in this area of the law; and the Herbert Wechsler National Criminal Law Moot Court Competition, the only national moot court competition devoted specifically to substantive criminal law.

In addition, they contribute to the Buffalo Criminal Law Center's popular and award-winning Web site, http://wings.buffalo.edu/law/bclc, which has an extensive collection of materials on American and foreign criminal law, including an annotated version of the New York Penal Law, a wide selection of New York criminal cases, and the only complete collection of New York State offenses.

Said Dubber: "The LL.M. program in criminal law forms part of the center's effort to assign criminal law its rightful place in American legal education. If we want to improve the quality of criminal justice in our country, we need well-trained and well-rounded prosecutors and criminal defense attorneys."

As a law student, Tonia Rodriguez '99 took the entire criminal law concentration, including the criminal law colloquium. As part of the colloquium, she contributed to the Law Center's Web site. She then joined the inaugural LL.M. class.

"When I begin working as a prosecutor in the Bronx district attorney's office this fall, I look forward to accessing the Law Center's unique Web site. During the interviewing process, I found that potential employers were impressed that I had taken so many different criminal law courses, both in the J.D. and LL.M. programs. My participation in the LL.M. program, including the clinic, will ensure that I will be well prepared for my job as a D.A.," she said.

For foreign students looking to increase their exposure to American criminal law, the program has proved invaluable.

"Parts of the courses are totally new to me," said Corinna Schuenemann, an LL.M. student from Germany who has already passed the bar in that country. She heard about the Buffalo program through her father, a professor of criminal law and defense counsel in Munich who knows Dubber professionally.

"For example," she said, "in criminal procedure, ours are defined by statute, yours are defined by courts. And the rules of evidence are completely different."

"I am hopeful that the LL.M. degree will broaden my opportunities. It is very hard now to get a job as a lawyer in Germany."

Another foreign student is Hisham Ramadan, whose undergraduate and legal education has included education in his native Egypt as well as in New Zealand and Australia. ("This is what they call a global education," he said.) He arrived at UB Law as the result of a Web search.

"I am very interested in criminal law theory, the principles underlying criminal law," Ramadan said. "I am more interested in research and writing than practice."

"I think one of the most worthwhile parts of the program here is the annual conference that Professor Dubber organizes. He invites the best professors in the criminal law area, from throughout the United States and other countries as well. You have the opportunity to interact with the really best people."

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