4-1-2017

New Cross-Border LL.M. Program Invites the World to Buffalo

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Recommended Citation
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By a happy accident of geography, New York’s public law school happens to have a presence on an international border. Now, the School of Law is leveraging its proximity to Canada to create a new degree – a master of laws program in cross-border legal studies.

The year-long program, like most LL.M. programs in the United States, is expected to attract primarily international students. The first class could enroll as early as this fall, says Professor Meredith Kolsky Lewis (inset), who will direct the program. She also serves as vice dean for international and graduate programs and director of the School of Law’s Cross-Border Legal Studies Center.

The Cross-Border LL.M. is unique, Lewis says. “Because we are on an international border, which is quite unusual, we have access to alumni and others who are engaging in cross-border practice every day. So we’re able to give our students practical experience as well as classroom experience. We’re also not that far from Toronto, and there are other major commercial centers on both sides of the border within a couple of hours’ drive.”

Admission to the program requires a first degree in law, which is an undergraduate program in most of the rest of the world. Students will take four courses from over 30 offerings relevant to cross-border legal studies, as well as a legal research and writing class and a course that introduces the U.S. legal system. The remainder of the students’ coursework consists of electives from the rest of the law school’s course offerings. Each student will be assigned an academic adviser to provide one-on-one guidance throughout the program.

The LL.M. program will share many elements with the concentration in cross-border legal studies currently offered to School of Law students, including a major...
capstone project that is executed in conjunction with lawyers at major Buffalo and Ontario, Canada, firms that have a significant cross-border practice. Areas of practice include trade, tax, immigration, real estate, and corporate and transactional work. The capstone course teaches students to identify relevant legal issues in real-world cross-border contexts while learning lawyering skills such as professionalism, accurately recording billable time, business development techniques, and legal research and writing.

Among the participating firms is Phillips Lytle, where Douglas W. Dimitroff ’89 is a partner who has worked with students interested in cross-border legal practice. The capstone course, he says, is “a very hands-on class that develops assignments based upon real-life scenarios. It’s a very practical class. We put the students in a position of having to provide legal advice to a theoretical client. We treat the students as if they were new associates. “The cross-border issues that we’re working with in the capstone class are similar to what we regularly see in practice,” Dimitroff says. “So much of what we see is often global trade and global issues that extend beyond Canada.”

He says his firm benefits as well by being exposed to promising students who may have otherwise chosen to work at another global law firm.

Dimitroff, who chairs the School of Law’s Dean’s Advisory Council, says that despite the recent decline in interest among international students for studying in the United States, the growing global nature of economic activity means there will always be a market for expertise in cross-border legal issues. “Mid-size and smaller U.S. companies are increasingly doing business abroad,” Dimitroff says. “Most international businesses recognize that to compete effectively they need to expand to the U.S. market. That trend is not declining. Activity is definitely picking up.”

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— Vice Dean and Professor Meredith Kolsky Lewis