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New director sharpens tools for students’ success

Something happens to law students between their first and third years of law school. They learn to think like lawyers.

It’s a twofold process, says William MacDonald, the School of Law’s new director of academic success. At first, he says, the challenge is to open up their thinking, so they can flexibly apply a given set of principles to a variety of fact patterns and situations. As they head into their final year, though, the focus turns to the bar exam and amassing the substantive law that gets new graduates past that final hurdle.

Those challenges play out in every classroom, every day. McDonald is helping to give all students the tools and support they need to flourish academically.

“Law school has become more intense than it used to be,” he says. “There are increasingly more requirements in experiential learning and writing classes, long-term writing projects, and there are a lot of expectations that students will pursue internships and externships. Academic support is a way for students to get up to speed in the skills they need to be lawyers and to succeed in law school.”

McDonald was a private practitioner and a legal research and writing professor before he decided to focus his career on student services. He worked as a career adviser for master of laws students at Georgetown University School of Law, where he earned his J.D., and then in academic support at Whittier Law School in California before joining the UB School of Law faculty this summer.

Now he’s the go-to person for students who will benefit from one-on-one coaching in academic skills. More than that, he’s looking to make it clear that all students have room to grow and improve, not just those who find themselves struggling.

“There’s a perception that these services are about filling in deficits that some people have,” MacDonald says, “and certainly there’s always a subset of people who are just not getting it. You can’t always identify from test scores where people are going to falter coming into law school. But I really want to reach out to the bulk of people in the middle. We’re trying to turn this into a culture where academic success is seen as a great resource that is available to everybody in the school, and you can take advantage of it to the extent that it’s helpful to you.”

All first-year students take Legal Profession, which McDonald teaches with adjunct professor Helen “Nellie” Drew ’88. It’s a nuts-and-bolts course, he says, that answers a lot of standard 1L questions: How do you take notes? What is a legal rule? How do you apply logic? How do I manage exams? What is it my professors really expect from me?

In the spring, he’ll also lead a teaching team in a bar preparation course for third-year students – not the grinding review of substantive law for which most students seek out commercial review courses, but making sure they have the study skills that will make their bar prep fruitful and effective. The course also introduces students to the formats of exams including the Multistate Performance Test, with its emphasis on demonstrating logical and creative approaches to legal questions.

MacDonald is also looking to build on the school’s existing mentor program by collaborating with the law school’s Career Services Office and the Office of Alumni Relations. “Ultimately, we’d like to have a seamless program where students are matched up with mentors and those mentors form a long-term connection with their mentee and are a resource for them,” he says. “In order to do that, we need to be resources for the mentors themselves, and provide them with materials and coaching, so they can be effective in that role.”