

UB Law Forum

Volume 23
Number 2 *Spring 2011*

Article 10

4-1-2011

Our Students: Ready for the Future

UB Law Forum

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Recommended Citation

UB Law Forum (2011) "Our Students: Ready for the Future," *UB Law Forum*: Vol. 23: No. 2, Article 10.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol23/iss2/10

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Focus on Legal Skills

U B L A W F O R U M • S P R I N G 2 0 1 1

OUR STUDENTS: *ready for the future*



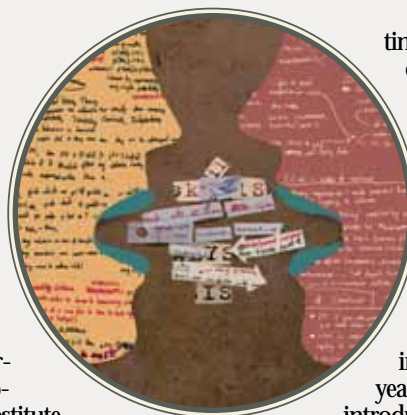
From new courses to new opportunities for students to sample professional life, UB Law School is redoubling its efforts to produce lawyers ready to practice on day one. The new focus is apparent across the board – and already it's paying off.

From the classroom to the law office

What will professional life be like for the lawyer of the future? There are as many opinions about that crucial question as there are pundits raising them.

What is clear, though, is that even with the seemingly radical changes in the profession being wrought by the Information Age and continuing economic pressures, there is no substitute for the skills that lawyers have wielded for time immemorial: the close reading, clear writing and analytical thinking that are every good attorney's stock in trade.

And so, even as the future of lawyering remains unknowable, UB Law School has recommitted itself to imparting to every student the skills necessary to succeed in 21st century practice. Drawing on its close connections with the bench and bar, the school con-



tinues to take the pulse of the legal community and meet its needs now and into the future. As a phrase often heard around O'Brien Hall has it, UB Law is graduating new lawyers who will be "ready to practice on day one."

Putting skills first

The most substantial change in the Law School's curriculum in years takes full effect this year with the introduction of the Legal Skills initiative. Under the direction of Vice Dean for Legal Skills Charles Patrick Ewing, Legal Skills comprises curriculum components, moot court and trial technique experiences, published journals, professional development and legal externships.

For years, UB Law students have been required to take two semesters of research and writing. Now the

Continued on page 10



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– Vice Dean for Legal Skills Charles Patrick Ewing

newly renamed Legal Analysis, Writing and Research program, or LAWR, has expanded to require three semesters of coursework, begun last fall with the entering Class of 2013. A vote of the faculty affirmed the change.

“Legal analysis and legal writing are the two fundamental skills of any lawyer,” Ewing says.

“This enables us now to not only give students more training in these skills, but to give it to them in pieces that they are more able to deal with at their level. We don’t have to rush students to get all this in.” One skills course will be required in each semester of a student’s first year, with the third in the second year. UB Law recently hired two new instructors (see Page 17) to help implement the additional coursework.

The change grows out of a series of focus groups that the school conducted with judges, judicial clerks and attorneys. “We asked what skills our students need on day one and what they do during their first week in a law office,” Ewing says. “We received a tremendous amount of feedback. We also looked at every law school in the United States, focusing especially on the top 10. We found that nine of them required at least three semesters of research and writing.”

In addition, he said, students will be required to take at least one other course with a major writing component, such as an externship or a trial technique course. About 160 students participate in trial technique programs each year. A new course addresses the direct and cross-examination of expert witnesses in civil and criminal cases, and three special Saturday programs each semes-

ter for trial technique students include the presentation of a simulated trial by top local litigators as well as lectures on topics such as evidentiary issues in trial practice.

“Our first-year students spend a considerable share of their time in legal analysis, writing and research, which provides the basic building blocks for our Legal Skills curriculum,” Ewing says. “UB Law students learn the basic practice skills required of every law graduate in the 21st century job market. Students

in our LAWR courses not only learn to use the law library and state-of-the-art computer legal databases, they develop their analytical and writing skills by researching and producing a series of written assignments, such as legal memoranda and motions. Assignments are reviewed by members of our full-time LAWR faculty, all of whom are seasoned lawyers with extensive practice experience. LAWR faculty members meet individually with first-year students on a regular basis and provide detailed critiques of their work.”

All of this activity, Ewing says, including the school’s successful trial technique program and success in local and national moot court competitions, “redounds to the school’s benefit in terms of reputation,” both the visibility created by hosting competitions and the performance of UB Law students at com-

petitions across the country. And success breeds success – Ewing says that UB Law has been able to be more selective in fielding trial teams, making the teams better prepared to compete on a national level.

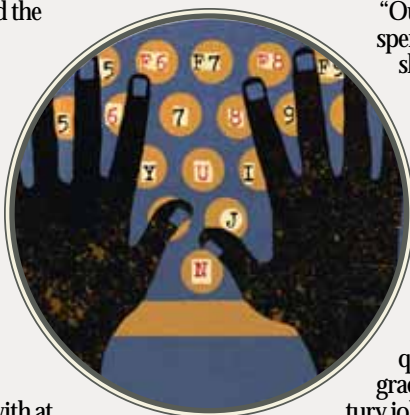
Also under the Legal Skills umbrella is the school’s program of externships. Ewing says many more students are taking advantage of these unpaid, for-credit experiences in judicial clerkships, in law offices and in not-for-profit and government agencies. Many more judicial externships have developed, he said, under the leadership of Director of Externship Programs Lise Gelernter.

Administrators are also working to streamline and standardize the work processes of the law journals published at UB Law, under the direction of Associate Professor Rick Su. And the school’s academic support program, directed by Barbara Sherk, has become part of the Legal Skills initiative, with support for students preparing for the bar exam and other professional development services.

Alumni involvement

The Law School’s alumni cohort, whose energy is a signal strength of the institution, has stepped up to reinforce these efforts and to help new graduates negotiate the tricky waters of the legal hiring process.

Each of the four official alumni chapters has a substantial steering committee, says Lisa M. Mueller, assistant director of the UB Law Alumni Association, and these alumni have come forward with major initiatives in support of current students and new graduates. “All the chapters want to do something that



involves student engagement,” she says.

This year brought the second installment of Rochester Day at the school, in which 14 alumni from the Rochester area – where the Law School’s second-largest concentration of alumni practice – gave a three-part program that included individual presentations, a panel discussion and then small-group mentoring sessions. A similar D.C. Day has introduced students to the possibilities for practice in the nation’s capital.

A major initiative last summer, to be repeated this summer, is a program of mock interviews by alumni practicing in New York City. After the Career Services Office helped set up an intensive round of interviews for students at firms in the city, UB Law alumni there were matched with students seeking work in their practice area. They did some mock interviews, prepping the students for the real thing and reducing the anxiety level of the job search. After the real interviews were over, there was a social gathering for alumni and students – a time for debriefing and building professional connections. “The practice of law, like any profession, is very dependent on relationships,” Mueller says. “Sometimes those relationships lead to employment, sometimes they lead to further clients. Our alumni provide our students with invaluable professional contacts.”

These initiatives come on top of the school’s network that puts prospective students, current students, students working for a summer in an area, in touch with alumni volunteers for some informal mentoring, and UB Law’s formal mentoring program, in which first-year students are matched with a professional mentor.

The students sign on

Second-year student Frank Ewing (no relation to the professor), president of the Student Bar Association, says he has seen an incremental growth in professional skills development in just the time he has been at UB Law. “It’s very practical,” he says. “We have two tools as attorneys: our written work and whatever comes out of our mouth. To the extent that we can learn the skills that bolster both of those, we’re in a good place. Even in the early stages of this emphasis on skills, it’s starting to pay off.”

The SBA, which comprises 32 clubs and organizations – including five academic journals and a half-dozen moot courts – is reorienting itself toward skill development as well. It has created a

speaker series in which prominent local attorneys and judges talk

about what they do, then meet informally with small groups of students. “You can get 20 students around these very bright and intelligent people in a cozy setting,” Ewing says. “A lot of lawyering is based on relationships. To the extent that we can facilitate relationship-building, that’s what we’re going to do.”

On April 2, the SBA hosted the Law School’s first Day of Service, sending students into the community for volunteer efforts of all sorts. “I think sometimes the city forgets that we have a whole pool of talent and intellectual bandwidth here that maybe they’re not using as much as they should,” Ewing says.

Continued on page 12



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*– Frank Ewing ’12,
Student Bar
Association president*



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 – Joseph M. Hanna '05,
 Minority Bar
 Association president

A diverse environment

Recognizing the educational value of a diverse student body, as well as ensuring access to the State University of New York system's only law school, also is key to building a legal community that reflects the wider community.

In conjunction with UB's Millard Fillmore College and the Minority Bar Association of Western New York, the Law School is part of a task force aimed at recruiting and retaining qualified minority students. The task force's programs have even reached down to the elementary level of the Buffalo Public Schools (a presentation, “Goldilocks on Trial,” to get youngsters thinking about law as a career), a speaker series at area high schools on legal careers and law school, and, in the planning stages, a pre-law preparatory program for college freshmen and sophomores, called Explore Law, that seeks to expand the pool of qualified minority applicants to UB Law.

Joseph M. Hanna '05, president of the Minority Bar Association of Western New York, says the association is committed to supporting UB Law School's minority students in practical skills that will help them succeed in the legal world.

“One of my agenda items is to reconnect with UB Law School and reconnect with its diverse students,” says Hanna, a partner in the Buffalo law firm Goldberg Segalla. “They're our future leaders, not only of the legal community but of Western New York. We need these students to work in the community, and know that we're here to mentor them and help them

and pass along practical tips and information.”

Toward that end, the Minority Bar Association has sponsored career panels at the schools, and on April 5 presented a well-attended forum called “Pass the Bar – The First Time.”

“Not all law students come directly from undergraduate school,” Hanna says. “They may have families to raise and kids at home. Along with spending the necessary time to study, they still have to raise their children.”

So the panel included lawyers in just that situation who did pass the bar – as well as lawyers who didn't pass the first time, but persisted until they did.

The Minority Bar Association also has established a clerkship program for minority students, placing them in criminal, civil and family courts throughout Western New York. More than 13 judges have expressed interest in the program, Hanna says.

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In conjunction with the Minority Bar Association, the Law School is also working to secure a grant to bring 25 to 30 disadvantaged local college students to the campus in the summer to take several weeks of law courses to be taught by full-time faculty.

