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The Marshall plan

At JMLS, getting students ready for work sometimes means pushing new practices

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It's a Tuesday afternoon at The John Marshall Law School and Nicholas Navarro is getting ready for a dogfight.

Navarro, a third-year student, stands in a courtroom on the school's 14th floor, practicing his closing argument for the upcoming National Animal Law Competition in Chicago which was, at the time, 10 days away.

He is defending the owner of a golden retriever that tussled violently with a pit bull, and throughout the 20-minute argument, he flips through large placards with his main points and circles key words in blue marker.

Watching him are professor Susann M. MacLachlan, the director of the school's Center for Advocacy and Dispute Resolution and coach of its competitive trial teams, and Cheyne E. Adam, a John Marshall graduate who won the event in 2009.

They watch Navarro silently, taking notes on his performance. One of the main criticisms? He circled too many words.

"The board is covered in circles," Adam says, clearly disappointed.

The three discuss the blue circles, debate how many blue circles are enough to help win and how many blue circles will distract judges from the substance of the argument.

Navarro listens and stores away the notes: fewer blue circles.

It was the biggest conclusion drawn in yet another intensive



Retired Lake County circuit judge Raymond J. McKoski presides over a courtroom simulation as Minya Coleman-Owens takes the witness stand under the questioning of law student Sara Strom during a trial advocacy course at The John Marshall Law School. The 115-year-old institution aims to make students "practice-ready" through hands-on experiences.

practice session between Navarro, MacLachlan, Adam and John Marshall alumnus and former two-time champion Anthony M. Sam. Since December, Navarro and his coaches had been meeting six days a week for anywhere from one to 2½ hours, methodically chipping away the imperfections in Navarro's presentation.

Navarro's closing argument competition is one of the many hands-on legal opportunities available to John Marshall students. Here, the focus is "practice-ready" skills — ensuring students are set to work once they get their degree.

At law schools across the country, the key is experiential learning. It's a way, they believe, to prepare students to weather the economic storm facing the legal industry.

"That's the buzzword," Dean

John E. Corkery said. "And we're all into that."

Building out

A John Marshall graduate visiting the school's campus in the Loop for the first time in five years will be surprised by the changes.

Though its address is still officially 315 S. Plymouth Court, the school's true front door is now a block east at 300 S. State St., where the school expanded in 2011 by not renewing its lease to a Walgreens store in that space.

Around the same time, the school had the chance to purchase the building at 19 W. Jackson Blvd., in between its facilities on State Street and Plymouth Court — creating a single, three-building campus.

"We decided to do (the Walgreens expansion), and then this building next door came available," Corkery said. "Had we

saved the money we put into the new facilities, I don't think we would have been as good a school or as attractive a school. (The money) is better reinvested into the facilities."

The State Street expansion includes a student lounge twice as big as the old one, while the Jackson Boulevard expansion includes the school's Veterans Legal Support Center and Clinic.

That program, which provides legal services for military veterans, is part of John Marshall's growing clinical offerings. While the 2009 economic downturn led to an increase in experiential learning initiatives at law schools across the country, Corkery said that John Marshall — "Chicago's practice-ready law school," as it's dubbed itself — largely had them in place already.

"We were oriented to practice

for a long time," Corkery said. "It goes way, way back."

The list of such programs is extensive. There's the Business Enterprise Law Clinic, the Chinese IP Resource Center, the Fair Housing Legal Clinic and the Patent Law Clinic.

Then there's the school's six education and research centers: Advocacy and Dispute Resolution, Information Technology & Privacy Law, Intellectual Property Law, International Law, Real Estate Law and Tax & Employee Benefits.

And while the school has always required students to take a course in trial advocacy, it also responded to the changing marketplace by implementing in August an experiential learning requirement via externship placement, the first of its kind in Illinois.

"What's good about our law school program is that it builds a basis for preparing our students to practice through either clinics or externships," said Anthony S. Niedwiecki, associate dean of experiential learning and assessment.

"They have been designed to provide (students) with all the necessary skills including writing, research, oral communication, negotiation, drafting legal documents and performing the skills necessary for a first-year attorney."

Because John Marshall requires students to participate in an externship or clinic, it has enough space to ensure all students can work in one at some point during their three-year program.

Old school

To John Marshall, "practice-ready" doesn't just mean being able to get a job. It means being able to make a career if no job presents itself.

In late 2008, Corkery and his associate deans began examining the school's curriculum. The goal was to find areas of law that were both expanding and underserved.

That way, the school could direct students toward practice areas ripe with potential value, empowering students to start their own practices if they didn't land with a firm or public office.

Their answer? Elder law.

The idea came in part because of John Marshall's Chinese IP Resource Center and its relationship with the East China University of Political Science and Law in Shanghai.

School officials there pointed

out that both the U.S. and China are grappling with issues that come with a large aging population, namely more elderly individuals than the next generation is able to care for.

With that problem, John Marshall officials saw opportunity — preparing young lawyers to create their own niche, helping senior citizens address legal issues that develop as they age.

John Marshall already offered a two-credit elder law course every other semester, so Corkery asked the course's professor, Barry A. Kozak, if there was enough substantive material around to build an entire program.

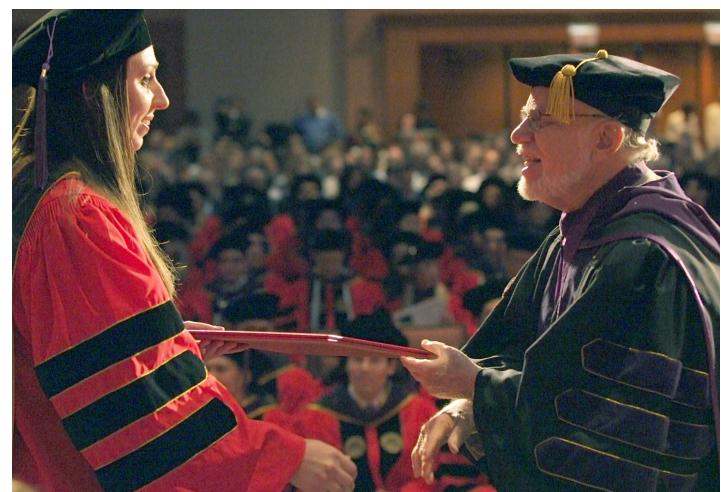
There was, he said, and he began building a program based on similar ones at three other law schools around the country. John Marshall offered its first certificate in elder law in January 2010.

"It just seems to be the right time (and) the right place," Kozak said. "It looks like more and more deans are realizing that with an aging population there's a need for attorneys who understand the special needs of elderly people."

So far, the school has had eight students graduate with the elder law J.D. certificate. Kozak expects those figures to increase, in part because of the school's involvement with the creation of the Cook County Circuit Court's Elder Law Division, the first major court system in the country to do so.

"Word has gotten out," Kozak said. "At least two students who came to John Marshall have come because they want the elder law certificate."

One of those students is Garrett Bonk, a first-year who graduated from Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Ind., in 2012. Bonk's father is an elder law



John Marshall Law School professor Robert Jay Nye hands a diploma to a recent graduate.

attorney, and after graduating, he spent a year working with him primarily on helping senior citizens with their personal finances.

"A lot of our clients had lost a spouse, and that spouse was the one who balanced the checkbooks," Bonk said. "It's a simple task, but a lot of elderly people lacked the capacity or capability to do it."

After that, he was hooked.

"It was a very rewarding experience, helping these elderly couples maintain their regular lifestyle while being able to afford nursing home care through Medicaid," he said. "I felt like this was a path I wanted to go, so I looked for law schools that offered elder law programs."

Bonk considered the schools John Marshall's program was modeled on. But because of Cook County's elder law court and John Marshall's connection with it, Bonk chose to stay close to home.

"Chicago is pretty much the first and only city that I know of that has an elder law circuit court," he said. "None of the

other schools had a connection to the community."

Now in his second semester, Bonk hasn't yet delved into the elder law program, but he has made connections in the elder law community through Kozak.

That fulfills a goal Bonk had when he applied to John Marshall: Reap the benefits of its alumni network.

"I come from northwest Indiana, so there are quite a few John Marshall grads by me," he said. "The reputation they hold in my community as good attorneys that can really articulate themselves well and present themselves well was a skill that I noticed and that I wanted to have."

Dogged determination

Navarro also came to John Marshall to benefit from its alumni. Interested in criminal law after studying law enforcement at Western Illinois University, he looked at several schools, including another one in Chicago.

He chose John Marshall due to a combination of its trial training and relationship with its graduates.

"I heard that the alumni who came out of Marshall were often involved in the state's attorney and public defense (offices). I figured that if I wanted to get myself in a courtroom and give myself the connections I needed to get involved in criminal law, that John Marshall was the best place to go."

One of the alumni he's worked with is MacLachlan, known to all as "Sunny" — she graduated from the school in 1994 and became a faculty member in 2002.

The school's personal touch has always set it apart, she said.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

THE JOHN MARSHALL LAW SCHOOL

Founded: 1899

Located: Campus in the Loop based at 315. S. Plymouth Court

Current enrollment: 1,466

2009 enrollment: 1,550

Where 2012 graduates are employed, as of March 2013:

- 48.31 percent in job requiring law license
- 20.77 percent in job where J.D. is an advantage
- 6.28 percent employed in other professional positions

Graduates tend to work in small to midsize firms or government, public interest, business or industry positions.

Source: John Marshall

"Having gone here and now being here as an instructor, I think that's what makes a difference for our students," she said. "They know we really care about them."

Though a personal bond has been formed, Navarro credits MacLachlan with imparting plenty of professional lessons, too.

"I feel that as someone who wants to be a trial attorney, I can step into a courtroom anywhere in the state of Illinois and feel

comfortable and be able to do what needs to be done," he said. "I feel that employers will know that someone from Marshall will be ready to step into a courtroom and be prepared on any given day."

He ultimately finished in second place at the animal law competition held at Northwestern University School of Law this month. But he indeed felt prepared.

His training process meant ironing wrinkles one by one, over

and over, until the argument flowed through him. That way, he would be ready whenever the judges tossed him a curveball.

He'll see plenty of those throughout his career. Through the trial advocacy program, he's gotten lots of practice swings in already.

"The problem with these mock trials is that the more you look at the problem, the more intricacies you notice," he said. "Even when (an argument) is completely polished, you always feel there is

more you could have done."

That was the mood in that 14th floor courtroom at John Marshall as Navarro, MacLachlan and Adam poured over the argument again and again. When they finished their session with 10 days to go, they left each other acknowledging there was still work to be done.

Navarro packed up his presentation and lugged the material away. He would be back tomorrow, hopefully with fewer blue circles.