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JMLS course preps students to speak legally, bilingually

'Spanish for Lawyers' course aims to build up proficiency for complex legal settings

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If you ask The John Marshall Law School adjunct professor Salvador A. Cicero how to best represent clients with limited English proficiency, he'll tell you it's about more than just speaking their language.

It's equally as important, he'll tell you, to be able to effectively explain complicated legal concepts to a client in their native language, which can involve more than just basic language skills.

That need is a part of what's led to the development of a new course, "Spanish for Lawyers," at John Marshall this semester. Starting last month, the class began under the instruction of Cicero, a partner at Cicero Vargas Law Firm who previously served as the chief legal counsel of the consulate general of Mexico in Chicago and later the director of the American Bar Association's Project to Combat Trafficking in Persons in Ecuador.

Although there are five students in the class currently, Cicero said the school has already learned of interest from students at another law school who would like to be able to take the course.

"It's very heartening to see the interest," he said.

The curriculum was designed by Kim D. Chanbonpin, professor of law and director of lawyering skills at John Marshall, and Sarah Davila-Ruhaak, director of the school's International Human

Rights Clinic. Cicero said the course was something that John Marshall faculty envisioned for many years, including by professor Arthur Acevedo.

The concept of teaching Spanish-based courses in law schools isn't a new one. Chanbonpin, who initiated the development of John Marshall's class, said other schools across the country and around Chicago offer legal classes that teach Spanish language or writing skills, but she said she went about developing the JMLS course with a twist.

The students — who are required to demonstrate they have intermediate Spanish fluency to enroll — must use the language as they develop lawyering skills by meeting extensive writing requirements, developing oral skills, studying international law and social issues and working directly with Spanish-speaking clients.

"Part of the reason why I thought this would be a good idea is because I think about the sort of issues that arise in our clinics, the issues that I see arise ... in practice, in terms of being able to communicate with clients," Chanbonpin said.

"Chicago has the third largest Spanish-speaking population in the country, and so I saw a hole there in terms of the skills education we were providing our students, and I thought, well, let's try to develop a curriculum that would go toward, number one, kind of filling that gap; number two, joining skills education with our clinical education; and

number three, with the overall goal of providing more pathways to justice."

Another driver to the course's development was simply the demand in the legal market, Chanbonpin said. In a paper she and Davila-Ruhaak co-wrote about the course for the Legal Writing Institute last fall, the two cited a 2013 survey by staffing firm Robert Half Legal which found 42 percent of hiring partners surveyed saw an increased need for bilingual attorneys, specifically those who can speak Spanish.

At the same time, while the country has seen a boom in its Spanish-speaking population in the past 50 years, a report released last month by the National Association for Law Placement found that there have only been slight gains among Hispanic attorneys in the U.S. in recent years.

Of 112,000 partners, associates and other lawyers listed in NALP's 2016 Directory of Legal Employers, 2.31 percent of partners and 4.42 percent of associates were Hispanic. Those numbers were up from 1.65 percent and 3.89 percent in 2009, respectively.

When broken down by city, the NALP found that in 2016, 1.58 percent of partners and 3.67 percent of associates at Chicago firms that are listed in its directory were Hispanic.

The need for more bilingual attorneys is no surprise to Cicero, who said there are thousands of litigants in Cook County who might need both language-translation services and a lawyer who can understand the legal histories from other countries — and how those histories might apply to their present cases.

While some of the students in the class are interested in practicing in immigration law and international human rights work, Cicero said the course doesn't focus solely on immigration matters. He cited an example of his own practice, in which he represents a successful real estate investor who is a Spanish speaker and wanted an attorney who could also speak the language.

"When I'm teaching this class, we address the different kinds of



Salvador A. Cicero



Kim D. Chanbonpin



Sarah Davila-Ruhaak

clientele that you're dealing with," Cicero said. "I think that people, when they think of Spanish for lawyers, they're thinking of immigrants that are very humble who come to the United States, right? But that's not the only people we're talking about ... There is a humongous influence of [Spanish-speaking] business people, students, that are middle- and upper-class people."

Another component that's central to the course is the understanding of social issues faced by clients with limited English proficiency, commonly referred to as LEP. Davila-Ruhaak emphasized a point that Chanbonpin said was a part of her goal in creating the course, which was to provide greater access to justice to LEP individuals.

What that means, Davila-Ruhaak explained, is to make legal resources available to LEP people beyond basic language translation.

"The federal government provides for documents in Spanish or court interpreters, but beyond that there is no true access for persons with limited English proficiency, so to me it's a major barrier to access to justice," Davila-Ruhaak said. "The course

is created in a way that provides students a background about, sort of, the realities faced by persons with limited English proficiency and cultural notions that are important; and then it goes into different areas where law students get to draft a contract and statements. ... To me, the course, it prepares them to work on a case or project, but more than that, to establish a real connection with clients and so speaking in their first language is essential to really understanding who they are as a person and more broadly the needs of that person."

"I think it's so important not just to do the legal cases but to really understand the needs of a community, to understand your client as a person. I think sometimes as lawyers we forget that

people have needs beyond a legal case and speaking their language is essential to really understanding the nuances of what's happening in the background that are not evident from looking at the legal case," she added.

The course is also designed to prepare students who are interested in joining the International Human Rights Clinic that Davila-Ruhaak leads, in which students can get a chance to work with LEP individuals in both domestic and international cases. In addition to John Marshall students, the clinic also enlists the help of pro bono attorneys to achieve its mission of representing clients facing human rights issues.

On that point, Davila-Ruhaak said, the Spanish for Lawyers class is open not just to tradition-

al John Marshall students, but to anyone in the Chicago legal community who has an intermediate Spanish fluency.

"The course is open to anyone, lawyers or law students in the Chicago area, and so we welcome the Chicago legal community to join us in the course," she said.

Depending on the course's success, Chanbonpin said she'd like to see the school's lawyering skills curriculum expand to include similar courses to meet the needs of other LEP populations. Specifically, she sees a need for more lawyers who can represent Chicago's large Polish community.

"I think it's a very underserved community," she said. "If we have success with [this], I don't see why we couldn't develop other courses."