

How Law Schools Are Preparing Students for the New World of Work

M. McQueen Oct. 10, 2024 Bloomberg Law

Law schools have been under increasing pressure to produce practice-ready lawyers for more than a decade, but as many top law schools launch new programs, it seems a tipping point has arrived. While some institutions have long had clinical training, primarily in litigation, schools are evolving their offerings in areas like transactional practice, entrepreneurship, and leadership.

The expectation that law graduates be prepared for work on day one is growing. With soaring billing rates, firms and clients are less willing to pay for long associate apprenticeships, the firm model for more than a century. “I think it is a responsiveness to students and to firms not wanting to have to pay for people to learn on their dime. Schools want to add as much value for their students as they can,” said Kellye Testy, executive director of the Association of American Law Schools.

Law schools have always taught students to “think like lawyers,” but increasingly schools are being called upon to train students to act like lawyers, as well.

At Stanford Law, for example, students team up with experienced attorneys to represent clients in cutting-edge cases in areas like IP and tech policy advocacy, and AI regulation. Third-year student Victoria Gardne said it was the most hands-on work she had as a law student, and the experience inspired her to seek out a federal clerkship upon graduation. “My clinic opened my mind to more possibilities of what work you can do as a lawyer, or what my work as a lawyer might look like,” she said.

Through dozens of interviews, many of the country’s top-ranked law schools have significantly overhauled their curricula over the last roughly seven years to include experiential learning opportunities and training in skills such as client counseling and contract drafting, or business skills like how to read financial statements.

Early-adopter law schools began offering transactional clinics, simulations and various business classes to give students more skills and training for legal practice, sometimes as early as the first year of law school.

The ABA’s legal education council is continuing to push the change even now, as it considers having practical skills questions for the Bar finals and required experiential learning credits to issue a Juris Doctor

Also driving the shift: technology.

Technology could have a “seismic impact” on lawyers’ work going forward.

“That is why we have to ask ourselves: ‘How are we preparing students for this?’,” Caitlin Moon co-director of Vanderbilt AI Law Lab said.

Many law schools are preparing students by adding more clinics and simulations, externships, and internships to help students get more practical experience before graduating. Some schools started making the shift in the last few years. Yale Law, for example, in 2021 began offering courses in accounting, corporate finance, ethics, emerging issues in technology, and globalization. The school’s dean, Heather Gerken, said the move was an effort to train students in skills they would need for their entire career.

“We realized that we had the long tradition of having this degree being a thinking degree,” said Gerken. “But we wanted to be more self-conscious and intentional about making sure we train every single student for their last job and not just their first.” [...]

As technology like artificial intelligence begins to drive the next evolution of law school curriculum, most top schools have updated their offerings in legal technology. But developing a broader understanding of leadership, negotiation, team skills, human-centered design, problem-solving skills will continue to be important with generative AI. “Lawyers exercising those skills in addition to business judgment will be of more value,” Testy said