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LAW SCHOOL NOTES

Building a law school foundation

John Marshall launches course to prepare students for next three years

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Though law students enter school with a strong set of analytical and studying skills, many aren't quite prepared for the rigors of legal education.

"Today's law student isn't necessarily a political science major," said Sonia Bychkov Green, a professor at The John Marshall Law School. "We have students with degrees in the arts, the hard sciences, social sciences, medicine. They need a better transition from their fields into law."

To help make that adjustment, all of John Marshall's first-year students are taking a new one-credit hour course this semester called "expert learning."

Also known as "Ex L," the course, which began this week, is designed to give students a foundational understanding of the courts and legal system, as well as what it takes to thrive in law school.

"We want to teach them how to be good law students — teaching them what it takes to read and analyze a case or even how a law classroom is run, because it's so different from undergraduate or graduate school experiences," said Green, the director of the course.

"The goal is to give them a head start and show them what law school is going to be like. We really want to build the bridge between undergraduate and law school."

The seven-week course has three objectives — understanding the law in a bigger context, learning steps for a successful classroom experience and preparing for exams.

"I see Ex L as a necessary step for any student and any successful

lawyer," Green said. "We are at the forefront of a new trend, one of helping law students succeed in law school from the start. Giving students these best practices for a legal education also will advance the value of the education we provide."

Topics include the structure and function of the courts, reading and briefing cases, the interplay between case law and statutes and the function of legal precedent.

"Learning these strategies will help students with their critical thinking, as well as their ability to develop good learning skills," Green said. "These are strategies that all students can employ for a richer law school experience, and I believe will be helpful well beyond law school."

The school's 350 first-year students were assigned to one of the 23 sections of the course. The small groups will hopefully enhance discussion and encourage students to work together on graded assignments, Green said.

"It's going to be a lot of hands-on projects, a lot of immediate feedback from those professors," Green said. "They will be able to see, early on, if they're getting it — to make sure everyone is doing as well as he or she can do."

The classes will meet every other week and evolve based on discussions and what areas the professors feel the need to address more.

"If you've got 10 students in a class who have gotten the hang of briefing cases and five students are struggling a bit, a professor will be able to modify assignments so some are pushed more and the five are given a chance to catch up," she said. "We really want this to serve



Sonia Bychkov Green



Anthony S. Niedwiecki

our strongest students as well as our weakest."

A similar program at Nova Southeastern University in Florida led Anthony S. Niedwiecki — associate dean for skills, experiential learning and assessment at John Marshall — to assist Green in developing Ex L.

"I took that program and tried to help modify it so it could help our students when they came here," said Niedwiecki, also the director of the Lawyering Skills Program and an associate professor at the law school.

"We spent the past year rethinking our curriculum, trying to come up with the best way to provide our students with the best training and the best opportunities to succeed."

Green, Niedwiecki and other professors at the law school who teach lawyering skills classes designed the curriculum for Ex L. They held a modified pilot program in the spring, which included four classes.

Green said the 17 John Marshall professors and adjunct professors teaching sections of Ex L have offered input on how best to structure the course.

"I really hope they have a richer experience from the beginning," she said. "It seems it takes students longer to just get the hang of law school so that even from the first semester, they're getting what they need to do so they can learn more and acquire more."

Ronak Joshi, a 2004 John Marshall graduate who's now an ad-

junct professor there, helped develop the pilot program and is teaching a section of Ex L.

"Only having been out (of law school) for a little less than 10 years, I think I'm more approachable about questions they might have or ask me about my own everyday experience," said Joshi, an associate at Garofalo, Schreiber, Hart & Storm Chtd.

Joshi said he hopes his experience as an insurance and corporate defense attorney will help students.

"I'm in court every day and regularly deal with depositions, trials, arbitrations," he said. "I feel like all of that I'd really be able to bring to the classroom and effectively communicate to them what is required of them in law school. That will correlate with what is required of them in practice."

Donna Alberts Peel, founder and executive director of the West Cook Pro Bono Network legal cooperative in Oak Park, will teach two sections of the course. She said she wishes Washington University School of Law in St. Louis had a similar program when she attended.

"Everyone would tell you, 'Make sure to outline,' but I didn't know what that meant beyond briefing a case," Peel said. "I think this program would have helped me better prepare for my first exam. My second-year grades were much better, and that's because I learned how to study and could concentrate more on the material."

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