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Building a foundation of professionalism

Lawyers, judges guide first-year law students through Supreme Court commission's program

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As associates continue to regularly communicate via e-mail with law firm partners who prefer to speak in person, Ann Hopkins Avery said young lawyers must learn to adjust their communication styles.

"Understanding how people prefer to communicate is key," said Avery, manager of professional development at Vedder, Price P.C.

"Sometimes you work with someone who just wants you to pop into their office. You might work with someone else who wants you to set up a meeting. ... Associates need to be sensitive to the fact that everyone doesn't communicate in the same manner, have a conversation about it and make changes accordingly."

And, Avery said, first-year associates could reach out to other associates to find out how to communicate and build mentor relationships.

Avery served as one of the volunteers who led a small group discussion at DePaul University College of Law as part of a program sponsored by the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism.

Between August and October, all nine of the state's law schools host programs to welcome students to the practice of law and introduce them to core concepts of attorney professionalism.

The Illinois Supreme Court established the professionalism program in 2005 to give incoming students at law schools early exposure to professionalism, ethics, civility and diversity as part of their law school orientations.

"Some students come to law school without a proper appreciation that this is not simply the

continuation of their undergraduate education, but it is training for a profession with its own distinctive ethical requirements," said Stephen D. Sowle, assistant dean for academic administration and student affairs at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law.

"The more we can send that kind of signal right at the threshold of their legal education, the better."

The program consists of two parts. The first includes remarks from Illinois Supreme Court and appellate court justices.

When 1st District Appellate Justice Michael B. Hyman spoke at The John Marshall Law School, he told the students that they became part of the legal community on the first day of law school.

"When you become a law student, you join the profession," he said.

"Whether you ultimately take the bar or not, you're still a member of the profession as a law student and should emphasize professionalism and let it stay with you for the rest of your career."

Hyman is one of a dozen justices speaking in the program. Some also lead a "pledge of professionalism" for the students to recite.

Each pledge, which differs slightly between schools, asks students to honor the legal profession, support fellow students, respect staff and faculty and uphold the school's reputation in their actions.

"The ceremony set the perfect tone for the students' introduction to their legal careers," Illinois Supreme Court Justice Mary Jane Theis said about the pledge she read at Northwestern University School of Law.

"Of all the oaths I am called upon to administer during the course of the year, this was one of the most rewarding and memorable."

Clifford S. Zimmerman, dean of students at Northwestern's law school, said Theis "established guidelines and standards that our students need to live up to."

"Hearing from an Illinois Supreme Court justice really links their early legal education and journey in the legal profession with recognition from the highest court in the state," he said. "And I think that helps get across the message that (law school) is a serious undertaking."

Whitney Woodward, a first-year law student at Northwestern, said the professionalism program reinforces the "seriousness of this undertaking."

"As attorneys, we're going to have special duties not only for our clients but the entire legal profession including the courts and the general public," Woodward said. "I think this was a good way to remind us to keep focused on what's important."

Northern Illinois University College of Law, John Marshall, DePaul University College of Law, IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, the University of Illinois College of Law, Loyola University Chicago College of Law and Northwestern's law school held the orientation programs this month.

At DePaul, John Marshall, NIU and the University of Illinois, students also participated in small group discussions using hypothetical scenarios about professionalism.

William B. Powers, associate dean of admission and student affairs at John Marshall, said the program "commemorates the students' first step into the legal profession."

University of Chicago Law School's professionalism program will be held next month and Southern Illinois University School of Law's will be in October.

During the first few weeks of classes, Southern Illinois first-year law students draft their own pledges as part of a yearlong course on professionalism.

The course, SIU law school Dean Cynthia Fountaine said, "gives students an opportunity to begin their transition from student to professional — even in their first year of law school — so that they are ready to hit the ground running when they enter our profession."

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Michael B. Hyman



Mary Jane Theis



Cynthia Fountaine