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The benefits of learning by immersing

Every semester, I bring my John Marshall Law School students down to Springfield to visit the state legislature during session. In the fall, the veto session proves to be far more lively than when we visit in March.

Our most recent autumnal experience did not disappoint.

Learning is achieved through experiential immersion — from banging on the lectern, to standing on behalf of a client, to scripting the oration that calls for change.

I invite you to think back to when you were in law school, gaining on your second year, likely leaving your core classes and pursuing electives of interest. At John Marshall, the students must complete four semesters of legal writing, culminating in a semester focused on the practical skills of drafting.

I teach the legislative drafting section, providing students the opportunity to learn about legislative procedure as they sharpen their writing, producing memoranda and proposed draft statutory language on issues drawn from current events. In past semesters, my final exam was to redraft our state constitution's redistricting procedure to install an independent commission to replace the current partisan system.

My philosophy of learning through immersion has tremendous results, in the form of graduates attaining exciting positions in policy, government and nonprofit advocacy. Plus, the issues involved get a welcomed infusion of interest and action from fresh and curious minds.

The students seem to come out of the experience more channeled into a true career interest, citing the practical

experience they gained through my class as one of the main sources that empowered them to pursue their dream job — and actually get it.

While in Springfield just recently, we seized the chance to visit with the many John Marshall alumni who serve in the state legislature and steward the relationships of so many we know who work in government and private sector positions relating to our state's business.

When I present the field trip to the students early in the semester, I ask those who hail from Illinois to recall the last time they actually visited the capital — and, invariably, they say: eighth grade. Years later, as law students, these same students still carry the sense of awe and wonderment the Capitol commands when witnessing the state's legislators in action.

If you haven't been to Springfield recently, I could not recommend a visit more, especially with the family — with the state historic site, the Dana-Thomas House, as a key stop when you are there.

There are three major learning outcomes I intend during our government unit visits: Apply the understanding of legislative procedure to the events at hand; evaluate the issues and the individuals involved; and create a memorandum that would fully brief an elected member of the same.

While visiting, the students can apply their individual semester projects to the experience at hand, thus helping advance their research on the issue. They depart with a unique appreciation of the dynamics involved with that particular issue, while building incredible confidence in what they know they can do for an employer once

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they pass the bar — in any market.

I walked you through all of this to reinforce my fervent belief that you, the practicing bar, can learn so much from our current crop of law students. The potential to provide even the most elemental forms of guidance to those exploring career options cannot be understated.

Further, the opportunity to talk about your own career decisions, of your involvement and dedication of time, talent and treasure to bar associations and local philanthropic pursuits, all helps these students gain perspective about their own next steps. I think we all can recall how challenging it was, at times, to maintain such perspective. You have the invite to go and make such an impact happen.

Law school programs, such as the Veterans Legal Support Center & Clinic and the Fair Housing Legal Support Center & Clinic at John Marshall, offer practitioners the chance to dive into live issues impacting some of the most deserving of clientele. Victories through these clinical experiences are heralded across the community, as the work performed helps provide the safety net that prevents the innocent and victimized from falling through

the proverbial "crack."

The American Bar Association is reviewing rule changes that impact how law schools arrange the third-year curriculum, with most signs pointing toward clinical and externship experience as mandatory and even the primary component. To me, that invites participation now by law firms and practitioners to get involved and serve as the functional faculty for the purpose.

Immersion experiences shape careers. I know my time on moot court competitions, working for Region V HHS and externing in the Northern District federal court and the U.S. attorney's office all helped forge my candidacy to work as legislative counsel down in Springfield after graduating and passing the bar.

I have committed myself to providing similar such immersive learning experiences for the students at John Marshall. The results have driven me to expand my offerings into post-class externship placements into actual legislative offices, as students, where they are free to pursue their passions. I am about to coach a team for a lobbying competition and I do envision providing a more complete career-based track of courses and opportunities for students wishing to pursue policy and advocacy.

Immersing myself in this environment, especially at my alma mater, enriches my life with relationships that last years after the classroom, sharpens my own range of skills and provides me an outlet to perform I could not find elsewhere.

I encourage you to discover how a few hours at a law school clinic can change your entire life — and the lives of so many others in the process.