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Detroit to Offer Marketing Course; Will Other Institutions Follow Suit?

Do law students need to know how to be rainmakers?

Apparently at least one Michigan attorney and marketing expert thinks so, and she has managed to market her idea to the University of Detroit School of Law.

While law firm marketing has increased in the last few years, and continuing legal education courses on marketing have proliferated, the trend may be spreading to law schools.

This summer, Julie Savarino, director of the Detroit-based marketing firm Business Development Inc., will teach a legal practices management course at the Detroit law school. She says it will be the first law school course in the country that will deal exclusively with marketing.

"People have to contribute from the get-go," she says. "They have to show their ability to make rain. Now schools are starting to recognize that everyone has to have these skills."

She apparently is not the only legal professional who thinks that client development skills, once unnecessary for young lawyers, are becoming important at an earlier point in a lawyer's career.

"Certainly we are getting that from the clients, that they would hope associates would have better business development techniques than they have," says Michael J. DiCorpo, a partner at Gupta, DiCorpo & Dykman, a Cleveland-based legal consulting firm. "That's been going on for the last 18 months to two years. I'm certainly not surprised to see it filter down to the law school level."

Mr. DiCorpo, who deals mainly with midsize law firms, says he has received many calls from law school grads eager for marketing advice.

"The kids are realizing that there aren't that many jobs available and they may have to start their own firms if they want to be employed as a lawyer," he says.

Ms. Savarino acknowledges that marketing has had a stigma attached to it - that many law firms think client development is beneath them. "That is changing," she says. "That's the big news, that a law school is actually embracing it. It was taboo for so many years."

But academia may not be totally ready to embrace the idea of for-credit marketing courses at law schools. Bernard Dobranski, dean at Detroit, says that a couple of years ago, Ms. Savarino approached him about a marketing course, and at the time he turned it down. But in the last few months, the school decided to expand and diversify its professional skills program, and someone remembered the course Ms. Savarino had pitched.

The dean is more cautious than Ms. Savarino about the merits of the idea and about calling it a marketing course. "It's how you run a law office, with a major focus on marketing," he says, "We're doing it on an experimental basis to see if it works. We're no committed to it. We'll see how the students react."

Dean Dobranski says he is very cognizant of the tension between law school purists who favor a more academically oriented curriculum and practitioners who want law graduates to have more practical experience. He says he does not want law school to become a trade school.

"We're not here to try and teach students how to go out and advertise," he says. "On the other hand, so many of our students start their own firms or join small firms that this may be one of the things they struggle with."

The course is being offered in the summer because of Dean Dobranski's uneasiness about offering a marketing oriented course. "There's less risk [of objection] in the summer," he says.

He even emphasizes that the course is called, "Law Practice Management - Client Relations and Marketing Legal Services." "The course I will be teaching," Ms. Savarino says, "is 16 class sessions devoted to marketing and client relations issues."

Peter M. Gerhart, dean at Case Western Reserve University law School, says he believes law students should be taught a more client-centered approach to law. (NLJ, 5-6-91.) But he distinguishes between teaching students how to satisfy existing clients and how to get new ones.

"Marketing has a bad connotation," he says. "All of the courses we teach should have an academic basis. a course in marketing which does not have an academic base and only deals with how to get clients is too narrow and too anecdotal."

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