



LawWithoutWalls: A Global Response to Legal Education Reform Rooted at Miami Law

BY GREG FONTELA — In many ways, legal practice in America has evolved over the years. While there is a strong base upon which it has grown, the way in which legal representation has been organized and delivered has evolved with advancing technology, changing markets, and developing societal values. This is not to say that the practice of law has abandoned its roots or foundational commitment to justice, but simply to observe that, as a field of service, the practice of law needs to change to keep in stride with those whom it is serving. In this same vein, it is of paramount importance that legal education remains up-to-date, or even ahead of the curve, in preparing aspiring attorneys for the reality of the legal market they will enter. As such, legal education has always consistently but slowly evolved: from forms of apprenticeship to a more standardized education, through the Socratic case method to an infusion of clinical work. The latest manifestation of legal education's evolution can be characterized by University of Miami School of Law professor Michele DeStefano's collaboratory LawWithoutWalls.

LawWithoutWalls is an innovative and ambitious response to the stark reality of the US legal education industry. Offered at Miami Law and at 24 other elite law and business schools worldwide, LawWithoutWalls teams two to three students "with academic, lawyer, and entrepreneur mentors to develop business plans that tackle the main problems facing legal education and practice today." Professor DeStefano leads the educational model, which feeds off of its accomplished community of participants. The program's open and interactive platforms "hon[e] problem solving, teaming, technology, cultural competency, project management, entrepreneurship, and social networking skills that can be applied to everyday practice." The essence of LawWithoutWalls is the establishment of a mechanism that simultaneously allows law and business students, as well as professionals across many disciplines, to develop practical skills to thrive in an increasingly technological and global legal field while utilizing weekly online synchronous meetings to tackle the issues that face the field.

The need for such a type of innovation and change in legal education in the United States is becoming increasingly apparent. Even President Barack Obama, himself a graduate of Harvard Law and former law professor at the University of Chicago, has suggested change to a legal education system that has been under fire as of late. President Obama recognizes the difficult situation for law students—the crippling debt and the redundancy of a third year in the typical classroom setting. As such, he suggests a compression of law school to two years, to allow prospective attorneys to more immediately gain practical experience to prepare themselves for a career in legal practice.

Michele DeStefano's efforts are not alone in answering the call to revamp legal education to prepare law students for practice in the 21st century. Marc Lauritsen is a lawyer and educator that understands the reality of a disconnect between legal education and the demands of present day legal practice. He calls for solutions that "emphasize the distinctive lawyering skills and [] come up with a better price-competitive model." As such, Lauritsen, in conjunction with IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law professor Ronald Staudt and others, has developed the Apps for Justice project, which facilitates opportunities for law students to engage in the development of useful legal software applications as part of their education. Such a project is implemented into the classroom at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, and Lauritsen and his team promote the implementation of Apps for Justice clinics in law schools nationwide. While many law schools and academics may still turn a blind eye to the need to change the traditional legal education approach that has served them well in the past, the numerous schools involved in LawWithoutWalls—along with many others revamping their curriculum to emphasize technology, online learning, apprenticeship programs, and other innovations— indicate that a law school revolution is in effect.

Change for the sake of change is not the answer. But utilizing comprehensive investigation into how the legal market has changed (and how it will likely continue to change) to spearhead reform in legal education is an approach that is consistent with the successful adaptations that legal education has experienced in the past. The understanding of Tapping Reeve in 1774 that the "practice of law is 'a learned profession and not simply another craft to be learned through self-education or apprenticeship'" led to a transition from apprenticeship to formal legal schooling in America. The understanding of Christopher Columbus Langdell that true lawyers have a knowledge of underlying doctrines and principles that must be inherent in their thought process led to his utilization of the Socratic case method of legal teaching in 1870.

The understanding of Michele DeStefano and her colleagues that advancing technology, emerging alternative legal service options, and growing demand for individuals with project management skills define the challenges and opportunities of lawyers of the 21st century are factors making LawWithoutWalls a model for the reform of legal education.

Since LawWithoutWalls' inception, members and alumni of the University of Miami Law Review have played a significant role in LawWithoutWalls. Advisory Board member Jaret Davis and alumna Cheryl Zuckerman are mentors in the LawWithoutWalls community. Liz Rieser-Murphy ('12) participated as a student in the program's inaugural year, and now serves as a mentor to student teams. Erika Concetta Pagano ('13), former Managing Editor, participated as a student and alumni mentor before joining the LawWithoutWalls team full-time. Further, LawWithoutWalls founder Michele DeStefano and Michael Bossone, former special advisor to Dean Patricia White and co-creator of LawWithoutWalls, were featured as the Keynote Speakers for the 2013 University of Miami Law Review Symposium.

Of course, not every new educational model can be as innovative or adaptable as DeStefano's LawWithoutWalls. There is an underlying foundation of legal knowledge that needs to be learned by every law student, and the Socratic case method has value as a tool to help achieve that. But the reform of legal education characterized by forward-thinking programs such as Miami Law's LawWithoutWalls should be emulated in approach and valued for the ideas that result from it.

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