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## The Future of Law: Nimbleness, Dexterity, Change

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Students from around the world gathered last year at the University of Miami for the conclusion of the first semester of LawWithoutWalls, a program founded at the School of Law. (Photo: Tom Stepp) [Full-Size Photo](#)

By Ashley Matthews and Nick Madigan | **Posted:** April 06, 2012

A shopper in London picks up milk, butter and eggs – and legal advice – during a trip to the grocery store.

A multinational Internet technology company invests millions in a startup that gives consumers the tools to handle legal matters with no human interaction whatsoever.

In some countries, you don't even have to be a lawyer to own a law firm.

These days, many people earning a paycheck from the law are legal entrepreneurs – without a law degree, a shingle or a wood-paneled office that bills by the hour. They are mining a field that for years was the exclusive province of lawyers and their firms, often at such bewilderingly high cost that countless potential clients most in need of legal help never received it.

"The only way lawyers are going to survive is to innovate in order to meet the market's evolving demands," said Michele DeStefano, an associate professor at the University of Miami School of Law and a founder of LawWithoutWalls, a groundbreaking course that draws students from around the world to address a crucial inquiry – how will law be taught and practiced in the future, and how will lawyers make a living?

Answers to those questions will be at the heart of an event called the ConPosium on April 14 and 15 on the University of Miami campus that will wrap up LawWithoutWalls' second academic year. At the event, 35 students – some from campuses as far away as China and Australia – will present the conclusions of investigative projects that are intended to produce far-reaching innovations in law.

"Every LWOW student must have one – a project that creates solutions for unsettled topics in legal education or practice," as Forbes.com put it in an article about the program that lauded its "forward-looking ideas" and "vibrant" aspirations.

While attempting to divine the future of law might appear to be a lofty – even unattainable – goal, LawWithoutWalls is guided by the realities of a world radically altered by technological wizardry and split-second connections. In such an environment, the practice of law is no longer confined to high-end firms and somber boardrooms, but requires nimbleness, dexterity and an openness to change.

"Lawyers will continue to be needed and new lawyers will keep coming along, but they face a world in which getting a conventional job may be impossible," said Peter Lederer, another of LawWithoutWalls' founders and a former managing partner at Chicago's Baker & McKenzie, one of the world's largest law firms. "It's crystal clear that wills, uncontested divorces, certain real estate transactions and simple employment contracts will not be done in the future by law firms."

In some respects, that future is already here. A company called Rocket Lawyer now offers low-cost monthly subscriptions that allow users to download legal documents; LawPivot lets businesses seek legal advice online; LexisSmart provides document templates for businesses and family law; and Legal365, an online law firm with a fixed price, offers customized legal documents.

In the world of law and lawyers, alternative business structures are popping up everywhere. The result is that lawyers now are working in a world far different from the one of 20 years ago.

"Today's lawyers have to have business savvy," said DeStefano, who directs LawWithoutWalls with her Miami Law colleague Michael Bossone. "They have to be able to problem solve and present their ideas in front of large groups. It's not just analytical and persuasive writing any more. There's no more hiding in offices."

As if to illustrate that point, the LawWithoutWalls course is driven by time-zone-busting virtual conversations at which presentations and ideas are batted back and forth around the world using instantaneous visual technology.

LawWithoutWalls' second year has brought together students from Miami to London to Beijing, and from Sydney to Palo Alto to Madrid. Participants are teamed with students from other law schools, often in another country. Over the course of the semester, and with help from legal experts, business leaders, legal entrepreneurs and faculty from each participating school, the student teams each develop a so-called Project of Worth that ultimately offers solutions to the problem, ideally with a creative eye on the future.

### **In the vanguard**

"We're very much in the vanguard of American law schools in thinking proactively about the future of the legal profession," said Patricia D. White, Dean of the University of Miami School of Law, where LawWithoutWalls was founded. "It represents a new paradigm for distance education, and we are able to do it with very inexpensive technology. We loan participants a MacBook, and use Adobe Connect to enable multiple people to have a simultaneous and multidimensional conversation. All they need is to be in a place where they can use the laptop."

The first semester of LawWithoutWalls – whose acronym, LWOW, is happily equipped with the exclamation "wow" – kicked off last year at University College London, one of the participating schools. The program's second incarnation launched this January at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland, and, as it did its first year, will conclude at the program's home base in Miami. It is only at the beginning and the end of each semester that anyone sees each other in person – the rest is done through computer screens.

"It's exhilarating and inspiring," Dean White said after attending this year's launch in Switzerland. "We put together, in one ongoing conversation, relevant people from a variety of disciplines," she continued, referring to the dozens of professionals – professors, lawyers and legal entrepreneurs, all connected in one technological form or another – who take part in the program.

The new legal environment is ripe for picking. From the booming site LegalZoom – a user-friendly legal documentation service that counts among its founders Robert Shapiro, the Los Angeles litigator who was part of O.J. Simpson's criminal defense team – to the retail outlets in Britain that allow shoppers to browse for some types of legal services as though they were choosing the perfect loaf of bread, the profession is evolving all over the world.

Even Google, the standard by which most online businesses are measured, has joined the world of legal entrepreneurship, announcing last August that it was part of a group that invested \$18.5 million in Rocket Lawyer, a LegalZoom competitor. Its founder told Forbes.com that the firm has 70,000 users a day and has doubled in revenue for four consecutive years.

In the United Kingdom, the Legal Services Act, which went into effect last year, means that companies unaffiliated with law firms may offer legal help to the public as long as there is at least one qualified lawyer on the payroll. The legislation, enacted to address shortcomings in the consumer-level legal profession, also allows U.K. law firms to accept outside equity investment. None of that is permitted – so far – in the United States.

But the easing of regulatory restrictions on the practice of law in Britain and countries such as Australia has given a more entrepreneurial cast to a profession that in the United States remains largely characterized by the old ways. Change is already afoot.

"Lawyers are competing with non-lawyers," DeStefano said. "The challenge to innovate the way legal services are provided has escalated."

She cited companies such as LegalZoom, which are now doing inexpensively "what lawyers used to charge a lot of money to do."

### **A "subversive" quality**

Gone are the days when a law student could graduate at the top of the class and effortlessly land a job at a big firm, forever sealing his or her financial future.

"The golden age of law firms has come to an end," said Lederer, whose career in law spans five decades. "The patient hasn't quite realized it yet, but that's the harsh reality. The way legal services are being delivered is changing radically."

To Lederer, LawWithoutWalls means rethinking "how people are going to practice law and deliver those services" in the future. "What LWOW is reaching for is to say that no matter how much people dislike it, change is going to be what we need."

Then, with a grin, he added, "There is a subversive quality to what we're doing."

At the same time, he said, "We don't want to burn down the edifice" – by which Lederer means retaining the core values of legal academia while re-examining its potential in what he calls the "shrinking world" of globalization.

"LWOW is poking at different ways to teach law," he said, "and how it might be done at significantly lower cost than how it's done today."

Long before LawWithoutWalls was born, Lederer was discussing such issues with his colleague John Flood, a law professor at the University of Westminster in London who has immersed himself in the globalization of law and its infiltration into everyday businesses.

If a supermarket can house a pharmacy or provide minor medical care, Flood asks, "Why not legal services?" He cited the Co-operative Group, the United Kingdom's fifth biggest food retailer, its leading convenience-store operator and a major financial services provider. Now, it's in the business of law.

"They'll deal with the claim from your auto accident, write you a will, and when you die, they'll handle the funeral and do the probate," Flood said.

As an academic mentor in LawWithoutWalls, Flood fosters the program's benefits to students who are looking for an outcome beyond the norm.

"The conventional approach to law and legal education is very narrow, very conventional and very traditionalist," Flood said. "The typical routes for most law school graduates are a law firm or an in-house counsel. LWOW is trying to instill the idea that they can find law in almost any area of life, to think about how they can use their skills and talents and legal knowledge in new and beneficial ways."

In LawWithoutWalls, traditional legal education is replaced by cross-cultural team-building, brainstorming and development of entrepreneurial spirit. Law students have equal standing with the legal and business leaders who mentor them.

"You discover that we are all a lot alike," said Casey Dieck, a University of Miami law student who was in the program's first outing last year. "When this first started, no one knew what it really was. We just knew we were a part of something fresh, new, and exciting."

### **A bridge across cultures**

Besides the University of Miami School of Law, University College London's Faculty of Laws and the University of St. Gallen's Executive School of Management, Technology and Law, the institutions participating in LawWithoutWalls this spring are Fordham Law School, Harvard Law School, the IE Business School in Madrid, Indiana University Maurer School of Law, New York Law School, Peking University School of Transnational Law, Stanford Law School, Sydney Law School, and Universidad de Los Andes Facultad de Derecho in Bogotá.

The program's students are uniformly enthusiastic about it. Erika Concetta Pagano, one of six Miami students in LawWithoutWalls this year, said it provides "an invaluable, enlightening environment to explore how my skills and goals position me to enact change in the evolving legal profession."

For the people who run the program, it means many late nights. Bossone, a special advisor to Dean White and a LawWithoutWalls co-founder, said his philosophical focus is on "breaking down the walls that keep us from connecting," although on a practical level he is the first to admit that using technology to simultaneously connect dozens of people around the world is sometimes a challenge.

"This was to some degree experimental," Bossone said via Skype. "There was risk involved. We knew the technology wasn't yet perfect, so we customized the technology to create the virtual classroom experience we wanted."

After solving most of the technological problems – including the prickly matter of China's notorious Internet firewall – the LawWithoutWalls team

focused on helping students find their answers while simultaneously adapting to the differences between their cultures.

"It's really easy to say you want to be global, but it's actually very difficult," Bossone said. "It means getting out of your comfort zone and seeing the world from someone else's perspective. It requires humility. The way you see things is not necessarily the way you're viewed in other cultures. When you're teamed with someone from across the world, you're starting from square one."

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John Flood, a professor of Law and Sociology at the University of Westminster in London, speaking in January at the LWOW launch in Switzerland. (Photo: James W. Nickel/Miami Law) [Full-Size Photo](#)



Li Longfei, a third-year student at the School of Transnational Law, Peking University, during the LWOW session at St. Gallen. (Photo: James W. Nickel/Miami Law) [Full-Size Photo](#)

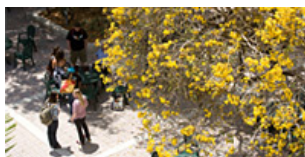



Diana Peñaloza, a fourth-year law student from the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia, during the LawWithoutWalls kick-off at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. (Photo: James W. Nickel/Miami Law) [Full-Size Photo](#)

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