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Best Practice

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BEST PRACTICE

In fall 2016, DePaul's College of Law launched the Third Year in Practice Program, a progressive approach to experiential learning that further prepares students for their first year practicing law. The following spring, the inaugural cohort of 11 students all graduated, passed the bar exam and have found employment—largely because they were ready to jump right into their careers.

By Jacob Sabolo (LAS '12)

When David Rodriguez graduated from law school in 2000, he was ready to practice the profession—or so he thought. Employed in Sidley Austin's general litigation group, Rodriguez found that his first year working as a lawyer wasn't exactly easy.

"When I started practicing at Sidley, I was behind the eight ball. It was a taxing year," Rodriguez recalls. "I ended up doing fine, but it was a lot of late nights, stress and anxiety, and it was primarily because I didn't know how to do depositions or conduct myself properly and persuasively in court."

In the United States, the American Bar Association only requires students to take six credit hours of experiential coursework. More and more law firms and organizations, however, expect new hires to be well-prepared and experienced with little supervision or training. According to Rodriguez, it's common for most law students to struggle during their first year practicing law.



Photo by Tom Evans

David Rodriguez, senior professional lecturer in the College of Law and faculty director of 3YP, helps law students land on their feet after graduation.

“Attorneys expect you to have a firm grasp of fundamental concepts of litigation. If they ask you to write a motion for summary judgment or a motion to dismiss, you should know how to do it. If they ask you to engage in due diligence or negotiate a contract, they expect you to have a reference point or have experience doing it,” Rodriguez explains.

After Rodriguez began teaching in the college’s Poverty Law Clinic (now the Civil Litigation Clinic), he became more involved in various experiential learning programs. Rodriguez and other faculty members soon felt the need to create a program that allowed students to put theory into practice, a program that truly prepared them for the early years of their careers.

Launched in fall 2016, the Third Year in Practice program (3YP) aimed to do exactly that. “We followed the medical school model by having students primarily do doctrinal work their first two years and then spend their third year actually practicing law, which would make their transition from student to lawyer a lot smoother,” Rodriguez says.

Based on similar programs in law schools at Washington University in St. Louis and Lee University in Cleveland, Tenn., 3YP students take experiential learning courses that include professional skills, legal drafting or classes in any of the college’s clinics. A large component of 3YP is the intensive externships students participate in during a semester of their third year. Each externship is tailored to the student’s legal interests. Students interested in the program apply during the first semester of their second year to ensure they meet the credit requirements and find an approved field placement.

Eleven students participated in 3YP’s inaugural year. All of them—now DePaul law alumni—are thriving in their careers.

“I can tell you that all of them are going places,” Rodriguez professes. “They had already been going in that direction, but I’d say 3YP is like a booster rocket getting them to space.”

3YP alumni, it turns out, have already landed on the moon.



Photo by Tom Evans

Corinne Cundiff (JD '17) chased her dream of becoming a lawyer. She’s now an associate attorney at Pfaff, Gill and Ports.

Becoming a Lawyer

Corinne Cundiff (JD '17) didn’t take a direct route to law school. “It’s something I’ve always wanted to do, but I got married and had five kids. I didn’t think [law school] was really in the cards for me,” Cundiff reflects.

But Cundiff always pictured herself in a courtroom, so she chased her dream.

When she thought about law schools, the first one that came to mind was DePaul. Cundiff liked the college’s Loop location, but it was 3YP that was especially appealing.

As a mom with a mortgage, Cundiff wanted to be the best candidate when she applied for jobs after law school. She thought 3YP would give her a leg up on the competition. “A big deciding factor for me was 3YP. I realized it would give me the best opportunity to be as practice-ready as I possibly could be,” she says.

In 3YP, Cundiff took several experiential courses, including negotiations and a litigation lab, in which she was able to train with professionals, and did her externship with the United States Attorney’s Office. According to Cundiff, the skills she learned

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A big deciding factor for me was 3YP. I realized it would give me the best opportunity to be as practice-ready as I possibly could be coming out of law school.
—Corinne Cundiff (JD '17)

in her externship directly translate to her current role at Pfaff, Gill and Ports. As an associate attorney, Cundiff focuses her practice on personal injury for medical malpractice and products liability, a position she was offered during her 3YP year.

“The most important thing that translated for me was my experience working on a misdemeanor case. My practice is now mostly based in state court, so being able to get a case ready for discovery and trial is the most important skill I learned,” she says.

Cundiff adds that while most law schools limit credit hours for externships and experiential courses, 3YP allowed her to be at her externship every day during the week and take more experiential classes than the average law student.

“The most rewarding thing [about 3YP] was definitely being able to focus on truly becoming a lawyer in my last year, not just being a student,” Cundiff says. “The market is competitive and if you want a job, just having the grades isn’t going to be good enough. You’re going to need real experience that makes you ready to practice the day that you’re sworn in.”

Real World, Real People

During her second year of law school, **Sara Dankowski (JD ’17)** clerked at Rathbun, Cservenyak and Kozol. Thanks to 3YP, Dankowski was able to do her externship with the firm.

“I figured if I could continue working there with the end goal of being hired on as an attorney, it would be perfect,” she recalls. Dankowski was sworn into the Illinois Bar Association on a Thursday. She was ready to go to court the following Monday.

Although Dankowski now works for the Will County (Ill.) Public Defender’s Office, the preparation and skills she received from her 3YP externship still apply to the work she does today. “I was able to do a lot of brief writing. I wrote a lot of pleadings. I was able to go with my supervising attorney to court and observe. I had a lot of client interaction and learned how to do intake interviews of clients and meet with them as their case progressed,” Dankowski says.

While she found it challenging to balance working, commuting and taking classes, she says the experience geared her up for the actual practice of law. Dankowski strongly believes she wouldn’t have been as ready if she hadn’t enrolled in 3YP.

“A lot of law school is teaching you how to study,

understand and interpret the law, but I don’t think it teaches you the day-to-day operations of a law firm, even simple things like filing documents,” Dankowski says. “I took practical courses like legal research and writing courses or simulation courses, but it was learning in a vacuum. 3YP is the real world. It’s real clients, real people, real cases.”



Photo by Sandy Rosencrans

Sara Dankowski (JD ’17) was sworn into the Illinois Bar Association on a Thursday. She was a lawyer in court the following Monday.

The Right Path

When **Clint Pierce (JD ’17)** was looking at law schools, he discovered that 3YP would launch at the start of his third year, making him eligible to enroll in the program. Pierce wanted to learn more, so he called Rodriguez out of the blue and asked him for more information. When Pierce got off the phone, he had no hesitations about 3YP.

“I wanted to get as much practical experience as possible,” Pierce says. “In 3YP, I could devote my focus to a semester of working. If I had almost a year of real law experience under my belt, not just interning for a couple of hours a week, I knew that would be a differentiator in the really competitive job market in Chicago.”

Like Cundiff, Pierce was placed with the United

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3YP is the real world. It’s real clients, real people, real cases.

—Sara Dankowski (JD ’17)



“I was proud to feel like an actual lawyer. I got through my first two years of law school, and then I threw the textbooks aside, put on a suit and got into the courtroom,” says **Clint Pierce (JD '17)**.

States Attorney’s Office, where he worked five days a week. Through his externship, Pierce provided legal research to attorneys and was able to observe interviews with witnesses. The most rewarding aspect of his externship, however, was trying federal misdemeanor cases, an experience that directly prepared him for prosecuting cases in his current role at the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office.

“In my current assignment as a state’s attorney, I’m dealing with people in the courtroom every single day. 3YP gave me the ability to interact with witnesses, defendants and law enforcement officials on a regular basis,” Pierce explains. “I was proud to feel like an actual lawyer. I got through my first two years of law school, and then I threw the textbooks aside, put on a suit and got into the courtroom.”

Pierce admits that he would not have attended DePaul had it not been for 3YP and Rodriguez’s directorship. “Without 3YP, I would have been terrified to talk to a judge for the first time in open court. I would have been terrified to walk into a courtroom and see all those people staring at me.

“3YP just allows you to fully focus on your field placement to gain the most complete and accurate understanding of your potential career,” Pierce adds. “You could either solidify your interest in that area or set that path aside and search for what you really love. Without that immersive experience, you might go down the wrong path without even knowing it.”

An Open Door

Last May, 14 students—3YP’s second cohort—graduated from DePaul. Although admission is currently capped at 20 students, Rodriguez hopes that as the program continues to gain traction and popularity, more resources will become available to students.

“Another goal we have is to expand the number of field placements, especially in private firms, corporate work and intellectual property and information technology,” Rodriguez says. “A lot of alumni have expressed interest in knowing more about the program and working with

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3YP gave me the ability to interact with witnesses, defendants and law enforcement officials on a regular basis.
—Clint Pierce (JD '17)

it. The best way for alumni to get involved is hosting a student who wants to extern where they work.”

One of the most important aspects of 3YP is the guidance and mentorship students receive, a component that Rodriguez wants to grow. “I really take a hands-on approach with my students from the moment that they’re accepted,” he says. “I’ve heard from them that a huge benefit to being in the program is that they can develop a strong mentorship with a professor who has a long history of practical experience. Fortunately for them, I have experience working in the private sector from my time at Sidley Austin and in the public interest sector from my work with the Legal Aid Foundation.”

“David [Rodriguez] was very important to the success of that first year because he made sure that all of us were getting support and guidance,” Cundiff adds. “His door was always open.”

“What keeps me coming back is really working closely with the students,” Rodriguez says. “It’s important to me, and it’s important to the students.”