

Education Life

This Is Law School?

Socrates Takes a Back Seat to Business and Tech

By [JOHN SCHWARTZ](#) AUG. 1, 2014



A panel sits in judgment at a start-up competition at Michigan State, where data analytics and business acumen are part of the law school curriculum. Credit Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

The students are pitching.

On a spring afternoon at Michigan State University, 15 law students are presenting start-up proposals to a panel of legal scholars and entrepreneurs and an audience of fellow students. The end-of-semester event is one part seminar and one part “[Shark Tank](#)” reality show.

The companies the students are describing would be very different from the mega-firms that many law students have traditionally aspired to work for, and to grow wealthy from. Instead,

these young people are proposing businesses more nimble and offbeat: small, quick mammals scrambling underfoot in the land of dinosaurs.

A few of them talk of outsourced services for larger law firms. Karen Francis-McWhite pitches one to help homesteaders claim properties for their own. Another would help immigrants file their taxes, an essential but frightening step to gaining citizenship. The tagline, delivered by its advocate, Giavanna Reeves: “Filing taxes should not make you feel blue when you’ve got a green card in line.”



MATTHEW RUSSO and fellow students presented ideas at Michigan State’s Entrepreneurial Lawyering Startup Competition. His pitch: a one-stop shop for law and accounting services. Credit Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

The Entrepreneurial Lawyering Startup Competition, a showcase of the university’s [Reinvent Law Laboratory](#), is not an activity many practicing lawyers would recognize. But it might be the kind of broadened curriculum many of today’s students need.

“Legal education has been stronger on tradition than innovation,” said Joan W. Howarth, dean of the Michigan State law school. “What we’re trying to do is educate lawyers for the future, not the past.”

Like a number of law schools looking to the future of a challenging profession, this school is pushing its students to understand business and technology so that they can advise entrepreneurs in coming fields. The school wants them to think of themselves as potential founders of start-ups as well, and to operate fluidly in a legal environment that is being transformed by technology.

Michigan State professors don’t just teach torts, contracts and the intricacies of constitutional law. They also delve into software and services that sift through thousands of cases to help predict whether a client’s case might be successful or what arguments could be most effective. They introduce their students to programs that search through mountains of depositions and filings, automating tasks like the dreary “document review” that was once the baptism of fire and boredom for young associates.

One of the founders of the Reinvent Law Laboratory is Daniel Martin Katz, an associate professor with expertise in big data and powerful computing and their applications to [legal studies](#). He hopes to give his students a leg up in a job market that seems increasingly bleak, and to help them become “T-shaped,” by which he means having deep knowledge — the downward swipe of the letter T — as well as a broadened set of abilities. So providing them with information on seemingly arcane subjects like data analytics can be a career builder. “Analytics plus law gets you into a niche,” he said. The program is partly funded by the [Kauffman Foundation](#), which supports entrepreneurship education.

With the marketplace shifting, schools have increasingly come under fire for being out of touch.

Catherine L. Carpenter, vice dean of Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles, tracks curriculum across the country. She said schools are trying to teach their students to run their own firms, to look for entrepreneurial opportunities by finding “gaps in the law or gaps in the delivery of services,” and to gain specialized knowledge that can help them counsel entrepreneurs.



DAIN BARNETT proposed Law-Spark at the competition. It would provide technical support — developers, product designers — to law-related tech start-ups. Credit Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

At Indiana University’s law school, Prof. William D. Henderson has been advocating a shake-up in legal education whose time may have come. “You have got to be in a lot of pain” before a school will change something as tradition-bound as legal training, he said, but pain is everywhere at the moment, and “that’s kind of our opening.” He advocates putting more technology and practical training into the curriculum to adapt to a field that is less about “expensive, artisan-trained lawyers” and more about providing legal services at lower cost.

Bill Mooz, a visiting professor at the University of Colorado law school, has started a four-week summer boot camp called [Tech Lawyer Accelerator](#) to provide, as he put it, “all of the things they don’t teach you in law school and they don’t teach in law firms but which you need to be effective in today’s world.” Students are brought up to speed on tech tools designed to make legal services more efficient. They hear lectures from companies like Adobe and NetApp. After

the four weeks, they spend the rest of the summer, or even the following semester, working directly for a company. Mr. Mooz calls the program “drinking from a fire hose.”

At Northwestern Law, Daniel B. Rodriguez, the dean, is expanding clinical education while using faculty members with technical and business experience to instruct in “the law/business/technology interface.”

Law school, he said, used to be a refuge for students who “might be math phobic, who don’t do numbers.” But the practice of law increasingly requires lawyers to understand the work and strategy of their clients, whether that means reading a spreadsheet or going even further.

“That doesn’t mean you need to have a Ph.D. or a master’s degree in math to become a lawyer,” Mr. Rodriguez said. “It doesn’t actually kill you, but makes you stronger, to have a background in statistics.” And, he said, “Not to be too jargonistic, but big-data analytics have pervaded many aspects of the management world, and lawyers need to have some facility with that.”

The Northwestern program stresses teamwork, though the lecture format is still a big part of the program. He noted, with a reference to the law school classic “The Paper Chase,” that “Kingsfield hasn’t gone away.”

These programs might be especially important for schools that aren’t in the top education tier, to combat the “very elitist” attitudes of the legal employment market, said Brian Z. Tamanaha, a law professor at Washington University in St. Louis. “Will it be enough for them to pick the M.S.U. grad over the Michigan grad, to name a local competitor? That remains to be seen.”



KACIE KEFGEN suggested a service to help develop playbooks for education administrators, who have to make tough decisions with legal consequences, often without time to consult a lawyer. Credit Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

Another skeptical law professor, Paul F. Campos of the University of Colorado, said he finds Michigan State's approach "admirable" but declared himself amused by the focus on tech. "The irony here is that these new technologies are destroying traditional legal jobs!"

Mr. Campos's [blog](#), *Inside the Law School Scam*, was harshly critical of legal education. (He discontinued it last year, writing: "I've said what I have to say, at least in this format.") Now, he says, "The fundamental problem remains that we're putting out way, way too many lawyers — or, should I say, people with law degrees, given the number of entry-level jobs."

For the students at Michigan State, the opportunities outweigh the risks. While none are likely to become expert programmers, they believe their training will get them a job at firms that need someone who can communicate with the geek contractors.

"This is the worst time in the history of legal education to go to law school," said Patrick Ellis, a recent graduate. "I am not top of my class, not at a top-10 law school, but I'm confident I'm going to have a meaningful career because of this program."

The winner of the start-up competition at Michigan State was Stand'n, a blend of social media's friend-tracking features and apps to connect people and firms with legal services on short notice. The student behind the idea, Andrew Johnston, called it "kind of like an Uber for lawyers."

Law firms, he explained, could use the service when they need an attorney to fill in for them at routine court appearances and depositions. The idea brought him \$2,000 from the judges. After the competition, Mr. Johnston told me he had not heard of [Lawyers on Call](#), a company that already provides such services, though not with an app. He was not deterred. He asked the name again, and wrote it down.

Dean Howarth said she had bumped into one of her more conventional law school colleagues who had seen the gathering and wondered if it was that law school staple, the moot court competition.

"I said, 'No, it's a start-up competition.'" Ms. Howarth said with a smile, adding, "I had no idea if he had a clue as to what that would be."

John Schwartz is a national reporter for The Times.

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