

Why Every Law School Should Teach Entrepreneurship

There are 1,281,432 attorneys in the United States, of which 470,926 of those attorneys are entrepreneurs. According to the National Association of Law Placement, the percentage of law graduates going into solo practice continues to increase year after year. With such a large and growing fraction of the legal sector launching their own firm, one must ask whether law schools are doing enough to prepare law students for entrepreneurship.

Owning and operating a law firm is no small feat. Attorneys who decide to launch their own firm must wear many hats – advisor, counselor, litigator, marketer, administrative assistant, bookkeeper, office manager and accountant. And while law schools are doing their part to size students for some of these hats, many are still graduating ill equipped to fit most of them.

Howard Conday recently opened his own criminal and personal injury law practice in Louisiana. While satisfied with the academic training he received at Howard Law School, he doesn't believe law school adequately prepared him to own and operate his own firm. He thought his law school seemed to "focus all of its resources on making sure students were prepared to enter and conform to the major law firm environment."

Is that still a good use of law school resources in today's legal market, when 12 firms in the past decade with more than 1,000 partners between them have collapsed?

The death of big law firm jobs is just one of the many reasons more and more attorneys are pursuing the entrepreneurial path. Jennifer Dean, a graduate of Washington and Lee Law School, recently opened the Virginia Immigration Law Center in Roanoke. The Center focuses exclusively on providing immigration-related legal services. When asked why she decided to launch her own practice, she said so she could have the freedom to develop case strategies and client relationships on her own terms. Many attorneys jump out on their own not only for the freedom but also for the flexibility.

While many law schools have a robust array of course offerings, some question their practicality. While my alma mater, The George Washington University Law School, offers a Wildlife and Ecosystem Law course and Atomic Energy Law course, they do not offer any entrepreneurial courses.

No offense to the three or four attorneys who practice Atomic Energy Law but a greater number of students are in need of entrepreneurial training rather than training on geological waste repositories. Ciara Vesey, the owner of The Law Office of Ciara Vesey in Bettendorf, Iowa says she thinks "law schools could do more to prepare students by offering more realistic and practical courses."

Luckily, there are a handful of law schools that have noticed the uptick in entrepreneurship and have begun offering courses designed to equip students with entrepreneurial training. For instance, The University of

Missouri-Kansas City School of Law offers “Entrepreneurial Lawyering Solo and Small Firm Practice” and “Special Topics in Entrepreneurial Lawyering.”. Topics include organizational structure, firm management and effective and ethical marketing.

Marquette University Law School offers “Starting and Managing a Law Practice.” The course is designed to equip students with the knowledge, skills and resources to consider self-employment. Specific topics include: securing financing and insurance; attracting and maintaining clients; generating income and hiring and retaining employees.

Various state bar associations are also beginning to offer entrepreneurial training for attorneys. The Washington DC Bar Association offers a two-day program designed to give lawyers the nuts and bolts needed to get a law practice off the ground, covering such topics as firm naming and business plans. Other states such as Illinois and Maryland also offer similar programs.

Ben Cramer, a graduate of the Case Western Reserve University School of Law and the owner of Cramer Legal in Cincinnati, Ohio, believes law schools could do more to help teach interested attorneys how to run a business. He recommends that law schools begin partnering with other departments, such as adjoining business schools. While some law schools may not have the resources to teach the intricacies of entrepreneurship, now would be an opportune time to forge relationships with local business schools, entrepreneurship programs and successful entrepreneurs.

By Jaia Thomas