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An Early Finish

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Some students weighed in on the University of Dayton School of Law’s first trial of the school’s new option allowing them to finish a semester sooner than the traditional six. The verdict: they will start their earning clocks sooner, save a semester’s worth of college expenses and get a head start on the competition.

"A lot of law students at other schools that I’ve talked to felt they were wasting their time (in their sixth semester),” UD law student Tommie Culpepper said. "Plus, we aren’t competing for jobs with the big group that graduates in May. My guess is that employers will perceive someone who graduated in 2 or 2.5 years as more competent and motivated."

Jacklyn Knuckles and Shahrzad Allen will join Culpepper in the class of 14 that graduates this month and be the first beneficiaries of the new five-semester option. Each felt the workload had no ill effect on their grades and was manageable with good organizational skills.

The accelerated option is part of UD’s new Lawyer as Problem Solver curriculum. UD developed the program two years ago in response to student and employer concerns that students needed to learn more practical skills in dealing with real clients along with legal theory.

"Employers want graduates who can hit the ground running," UD School of Law Dean Lisa Kloppenberg said. "We need to train people to be ready for the profession. Companies and clients want faster, cheaper and more satisfying ways of solving disputes. Law schools have been the last to catch up, so now we are stepping up."

Kloppenberg will be part of the Carnegie Foundation’s next examination of how American law schools educate students. Representatives from 10 law schools, including Harvard University and New York University, started a dialogue about law school curricula Dec. 7-8 at Stanford University.

Knuckles feels prepared to jump from academic life to working life. She said the Lawyer as Problem Solver’s emphasis on practical skills gave her opportunities to draft and edit contracts and clerk for a judge before graduation.

"The mandatory externships are the best things UD has done," said Culpepper, who worked with a criminal prosecutor in the Middletown, Ohio, municipal court. "We are put somewhere and given actual responsibilities. I’ve talked to students from other schools who’ve complained that they’ve been taught so much legal theory that they don’t know the law."

In addition to hands-on learning, UD’s Lawyer as Problem Solver program emphasizes service and applying legal education to solve problems for clients, communities and the world. Those skills may come in handy as lawyers line up to contest upcoming election results and the increasing number of eminent domain and privacy cases.

"Lawyer as Problem Solver opened my eyes in ways I hadn’t imagined,” said Allen, who had worked with lawyers while managing a dental practice for 12 years before starting law school. "Lawyers need to do things from the start that help clients avoid problems."

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