The President's Column

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Joining the Club Without Paying Its Dues: Newcomers View Their First LWI Conference

By Tracy Bach, Assistant Professor of Legal Writing, Vermont Law School

At the opening session of this summer’s Legal Writing Institute Conference at Seattle University, LWI President Jane Kent Gionfriddo asked people attending their first conference to stand and be recognized. I and (what seemed like) a majority of those in the auditorium rose from our seats. Looking into the sea of faces, I began to wonder: all of us newcomers had become LWI members gratis by dint of becoming legal writing teachers, but had we really joined the club? When I left Seattle a few days later, chock full of teaching tips, the latest in LRW research and scholarship, and insights into the organization, I was curious about what others took home from their initial LWI meeting.

Like all good professional gatherings, the Seattle conference provided a forum for putting faces with names. “It was good to see others as enthusiastic about their work as I am about mine,” said Michael Santana, an Assistant Professor of Legal Writing at Vermont Law School. While not quite the meet and greet frenzy of Sundance or even the annual law school orientation picnic, the conference created opportunities to see in person the people whose books you’ve taught from and listserv advice you’ve relied on. Not only does it satisfy your curiosity, it brings you that much more into the fold.

Moreover, the substance of the LWI sessions showed the concern for good teaching and caring collegiality that exemplifies this organization. It was clear from each session that experienced teachers saw the conference as a chance to mentor those just starting out, to help newcomers learn how to teach students positively. Numerous sessions focused on pedagogy, from how to create assignments and critique student work to drawing lessons from different disciplines to enrich our own teaching. Especially popular was a workshop on critiquing student papers, coordinated by Daniel Barnett of Boston College Law School. Judy Giers, who became a legal writing instructor at the University of Oregon last June and attended the conference in July “before teaching a day,” benefitted from the hands-on conference sessions and found the Basics track very useful. While taking a break from critiquing a stack of 54 first-year memos, she happily acknowledged that “I took part of the problem on covenants not to compete [used in the critiquing session] and incorporated it into my curriculum this fall. I already had sample memos to use as a baseline.”

Ben Bratman, Associate Director of Legal Research and Writing at the State University of New York at Buffalo School of Law, also found the session materials and insights remarkably helpful. “I could take these tangible ideas back to the classroom and apply them,” he recently

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Below is my testimony. I hope it will help you think about what you will say when your turn comes to speak, whether at your own school or at the national level.

"My name is Jane Kent Gionfriddo. I'm an Associate Professor and Director of Legal Reasoning, Research & Writing at Boston College Law School. I'm also the President-Elect of the Legal Writing Institute, a national organization of legal writing faculty at all ABA-accredited law schools in the United States, faculty members in English departments, members of independent research-and-consulting organizations, and attorneys in practice, all of whom are committed to the development of excellent legal writing in law practice and to the teaching, curriculum development and scholarship on legal analysis and legal writing in all law schools.

I'm here today to speak about the positive effects of 405(c) status for all full-time legal writing faculty. I want to begin by saying that I don't need to be here today because I already have the 405(c) support of my institution. I'm here because I know first-hand why 405(c) status is crucial to the development of the discipline to which I have committed the last eighteen years of my professional life. My five LR&W colleagues and I have had the support from our faculty as well as a long line of Deans at Boston College Law School who have had the vision to recognize that excellence in a legal writing faculty provides depth and breadth to the entire law school curriculum.

In essence, our 405(c) status has given us the kind of job security that over the years has allowed us to focus our energy and creativity on developing a sophisticated LR&W curriculum. It is this kind of curriculum that answers the question of ‘why should legal education care about developing the status of a group of faculty who teach legal reasoning, research and writing courses in the first and upper level law school curriculum?’

For instance, we would all agree that the first year of law school is all about teaching students how to ‘think like a lawyer.’ The question for legal education is, how best do we do this? By what combination of approaches to teaching legal analysis, by what pedagogical methodologies do we help the broadest range of students become excellent in ‘thinking like a lawyer’?

Most first-year courses, those focused in a particular subject area, teach legal doctrine and analysis through a systematic study of cases and other authority in large classes using the Socratic Method. This is a time-honored and proven method to teach first-year students legal analysis. We all understand this in legal education; less well understood, though, is that a sophisticated LR&W course teaches legal analysis from a different perspective, one that greatly complements the traditional approach.

A legal writing course teaches students the process of legal problem-solving—identifying relevant authorities, analyzing them individually and synthesizing them to figure out what they say about an area of law, and applying them to a particular client’s problem in a particular jurisdiction. Working on developing a sophisticated LR&W curriculum?'

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