3-14-2008

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Boston College Law School

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First-Year Curriculum Changes: Part Two

3/14/08--The Law School has taken a second major step in improving the first-year curriculum.

Two years ago the School semesterized the first-year calendar, and shortened course offerings in Torts Contracts, and Property (the first two courses from 5 credits to 4, and the latter course from 6 credits to 4). The faculty also added Criminal Law as a required course in the spring semester.

After recent lengthy meetings, the faculty made two further changes that were recommended by the Educational Policy Committee: to start the second semester one week later in January, and to eliminate ILPR from the first year curriculum and to allow first year students to take a 3 credit elective in its place.

The elective will be selected from a short list of offerings approved by the academic dean. Since the first-year students will be taking a variety of courses in this block, often with upper-class students, the elective course will count towards the student’s overall GPA, but will not be calculated in determining law review selection. These changes will be implemented beginning with the Class of 2011 (the class entering in the fall of 2008).

Associate Dean for Academic Affairs Michael Cassidy was enthusiastic about the new changes. "ILPR was a wonderful course with worthy pedagogical objectives, but after almost 20 years it had simply lost its steam," he said. "The new curriculum will allow students more choice in the spring of their first year, and allow them to begin to explore specific subject areas in the law that may be of interest to them. I expect that the menu of electives available to first year students next year will appeal to a wide cross section of the first year class—including theoretical, doctrinal, and more practical offerings."

The faculty are still debating whether to adjust certain upper-level course requirements for the class of 2011 and their successors. Upper level students are currently required to complete a writing requirement and to take Con Law II and one additional professional responsibility course, chosen from a wide menu of offerings. With the elimination of ILPR, the Educational Policy Committee is debating whether these students should be required to take a course focusing on professional skills in the upper years (such as drafting, oral advocacy, or negotiation) and whether upper-level students should be required to take a course focusing more directly on the regulation of lawyers (such as a professional responsibility survey course). It is anticipated that these deliberations will be completed and further changes approved by the faculty in time for the start of school next August.

The faculty also voted to require students to take a 'perspectives on justice' course prior to graduation, beginning with the class of 2011. Students can meet this new requirement by taking one course from a broad menu of offerings that explore the goal of justice from a normative, theoretical, or comparative perspective.

Cassidy commended the hard work of the Educational Policy Committee that led to this
change. "The Committee was ably chaired by Professor Judith McMorrow and comprised of faculty, students and library staff," he said. "The Committee considered many alternatives and heard from a variety of constituents--including faculty, alumni, and students. They also studied developments at other law schools. We think these important changes will strengthen the learning experience for our first year students."

McMorrow noted that the faculty discussion was vigorous, with everyone committed to finding the optimum educational experience for our students. "The challenge is that a great many courses and perspectives have a legitimate claim to being part of the first-year curriculum," she said. "In addition, we had to look carefully at the resource allocation to assure that the first year curricular changes did not impair the upper-level offerings.

As with all curricular changes, McMorrow said, there will be ongoing monitoring to assess their effectiveness. We are excited about the new opportunities being offered to our first-year students.