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Creating and Teaching a Specialized Legal Research Course

The benefits and considerations

By Erika Cohn

Specialized legal research courses are nothing new. Nonetheless, creating your own can be an intimidating task that takes time and hard work. Over the past year, I created my first specialized legal research course at Saint Louis University: a seven-week, one-credit-hour, practical skills course called Intellectual Property Law Research. I taught the class for the first time this past spring. What follows is an outline of my experience, and hopefully it will encourage you to create and teach your own.

Why Offer a Specialized Legal Research Course?

There are many reasons why offering specialized legal research courses could be a good option for you and your library. With the increased demand for practical skills courses, expanding librarian-taught classes beyond advanced legal research simultaneously fills a need and showcases the value librarians can add to the law school curriculum. Additionally, many areas of law have specialized resources that are not or cannot be adequately addressed in advanced legal research. Creating a course that focuses on a particular area of law provides an opportunity for in-depth coverage. This can be a great benefit for students who know (or hope) that they are going to practice in a given area. Your topical legal research course may also have a smaller class size than advanced legal research, allowing for more personalized, focused instruction. Finally, creating a specialized course benefits more than just the library, the law school, and the students. It also allows you, the librarian, to hone or develop an area of interest or expertise.

Topic Selection

Now that you are convinced that you want to teach a specialized legal resource course, you need to choose a topic. Do you have an area of interest or expertise? That might be the “easiest” way to go

because you will have a head start on the appropriate content and research methods to cover. Perhaps your law school has an area for which it is well known or for which a concentration or certificate is offered. Choosing that topic might yield more interest from students and support from the school. Maybe there is a hot topic or an area in which jobs are available. You could also ask the curriculum committee for suggestions, as they will have a good grasp of curricular needs. For me, intellectual property was

help. The first thing I did before creating my own syllabus was to look for examples from similar courses taught at other law schools. A quick Google search was fruitful for me, but reaching out to instructors whose materials are not readily available online would be another good option. You may also want to seek input from faculty who teach in the substantive area of law, as well as local practitioners, to find out what resources they use and how they use them. From there it's just a matter of organizing the

material in a logical order, considering the time you want to spend on any given topic.

Course Approval

Your syllabus is ready to go; now you need to get the course approved. This process varies from school to school, so if you are not familiar with your institution's procedure, learn about it. If you need to go before the curriculum committee, as I did, you will want to articulate how your course will benefit students and provide specific examples of how you intend to meet course objectives. It was extremely helpful for me to have the support of the other IP faculty, as well as the support of interested students, when I brought my course proposal to the curriculum committee.

Student Interest

For a class to be successful, it of course needs students. There are

several ways to drum up interest in your course. As you have hopefully created a good relationship with the other faculty who teach in that particular area of law, ask them to recommend the class to students in their courses. Better yet, ask if they will give you a few minutes of class time to come speak and answer questions about the course. Talk it up in



an easy choice. SLU offers an IP concentration, and it happens to be a personal area of interest.

Syllabus Development

If you are already an “expert” in the area, you might have an idea of what you would like to cover and how. If not, there are some good places to go for

"IN ADDITION TO STATUTORY, REGULATORY, AND CASE LAW RESEARCH, MANY AREAS OF LAW REQUIRE PROFICIENCY IN SPECIALIZED RESEARCH RESOURCES AND TOOLS."

your advanced legal research class. Participate in advising sessions if your course is tied to a concentration or certificate program. In short, create and accept any possible opportunity to be in front of students and plug your course.

Teaching Plan

You have drafted a syllabus, your course has been approved, and students are interested. Now you need a detailed plan for how you will deliver content, spend class time, and evaluate students.

Content Considerations

You want to provide a complete picture of the resources and research methods related to your topic. In addition to statutory, regulatory, and case law research, many areas of law require proficiency in specialized research resources and tools. Oftentimes, though, the tools are so specialized (and expensive) that law schools do not have access to them. This is certainly true in IP, where numerous products exist for sophisticated patent and trademark searching. Because these are tools lawyers use in practice, it is beneficial for students to be exposed to them in class. I was able to secure trial IDs and passwords for several products for use in class. Even when I could not secure such access for certain products, I made sure to at least mention and explain their purpose. It's also appropriate to reinforce general research skills in a specialized course, as they are applicable to nearly every area of law. This will be helpful for students who have not taken advanced legal research and will strengthen the abilities of those who have.

Class Time

Because this is a practical skills course, try to minimize the time you spend lecturing and maximize the time the students spend researching. There are numerous ways to achieve this goal, but, by way of example, my typical class consisted of about 30-40 minutes of lecture and demonstration followed by about an hour of in-class exercises. On days when one of the in-depth research problems was assigned, I gave the students time to get started in class. Then I asked for volunteers to show the rest of the class how they were

successfully navigating the problem. This also allowed students to ask questions during class if they were running into problems, rather than potentially spinning their wheels on their own.

You should also consider bringing guest speakers into the class. Students really appreciate hearing from practitioners and getting a sense of what kind of research they might be expected to do in the real world. I had great success bringing in a local IP attorney to teach part of the patent section. He gave the students a rundown of his daily research tasks, as well as his favorite and least favorite resources, and he demonstrated several research tools and techniques. It was helpful to have a practitioner's perspective and even more helpful to have a practitioner reinforce the importance of efficient and accurate research.

Vendor representatives are another great option for guest speakers. As I mentioned, there are some great specialized research tools available in many areas of law. Vendors know these products well and are always happy to spend time in front of students demonstrating what they have to offer. Students will use these tools in practice, so why not give them a head start?

Evaluation

There are many ways to evaluate students in a specialized legal research course. I opted to assign three in-depth research problems throughout the semester (one on each major area of IP—copyright, trademark, patent), as well as a relatively short pathfinder on an IP-related topic of the students' choosing. Class attendance and participation also counted toward the final grade. You might also consider a presentation or exam, depending on what works best for the topic and what you expect students to get out of your class. No matter your method of evaluation, expectations should be clearly defined.

Course Evaluation

Do not wait until the end of the semester to evaluate the class. Pay attention to how students respond to you and how they perform on in-class exercises and assignments. I try to grade homework assignments right away to

grasp how well they are learning the material. If it's clear that a number of students have missed a given concept, I know I need to revisit the issue and modify my strategy going forward. The students also appreciate having feedback on their work during the course rather than waiting until the course is over when it's too late for them to adjust.

The first time you teach your class, it's highly unlikely that everything will go exactly as you planned. At the end of the semester, take a look back and note anything that did not work or that you would like to change. Solicit feedback from your students and act on their suggestions. Course evaluations administered by your institution might be helpful, but at our institution they are not mandatory. The questions also tend to be generic, so it can be difficult to get useful information from the few that actually get submitted. I met with my students individually near the end of the semester and encouraged them to provide me with feedback either in person or via email. Several of them offered very helpful suggestions and constructive comments, and I am working to incorporate them for next year. I will also keep in touch with my students after they graduate and follow up for more feedback once they have had some experience practicing in the field.

Final Thoughts

Creating and teaching this course was and continues to be immensely rewarding. In addition to providing students with a new and directed opportunity to gain useful skills, it displays the value librarians bring to the curriculum and allows me to advance my own knowledge of a subject I love. If you are willing to put in the time, I am confident that you too can find success creating your own specialized legal research course. Good luck! ■



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