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Science project

New Northwestern master's degree aims to give tech-focused professionals a background in law

BY JACK SILVERSTEIN
Law Bulletin staff writer

When Northwestern University School of Law Dean Daniel B. Rodriguez tasked professors Leslie Oster and Emerson Tiller last year with creating an academic initiative, they knew pretty quickly what they wanted to do.

"We could have gone in a lot of different directions," Oster said, "but one direction we went was to think about creating a degree that would provide legal education for non-lawyers. We thought about what categories of people need to understand law but don't necessarily need to be lawyers."

Their answer? Individuals trained in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, better known as the STEM fields.

Tiller, the associate dean of academic initiatives, and Oster, a clinical associate professor who also works on academic initiatives, were on their way to creating a new, one-year graduate program — Master of Science in Law.

The degree will be available starting with the fall 2014 semester.

"The idea on this program was to think about what's driving the economy," said Tiller, the J. Landis Martin professor of law and business. "And technology, STEM-based business seems to be a pretty critical part of our economy going forward."

"We asked ourselves, 'Is this a group that we have been addressing with legal education?' And we haven't. We thought, if we were going to reach out further with our training abilities, what would we do for that group?"

The first step Oster and Tiller took was to speak with lawyers in STEM fields about their interactions with scientists and engineers. Those discussions indicated that a law background could help people with technical knowledge make better business and design decisions about their intellectual property earlier in the research and development process.

The next step in creating the program was to talk to the experts. And they did. Lots of them.

"We just got out into the community to help us design the contours of what would be valuable in this degree," Oster said.

They did so by having "hundreds of meetings" with Northwestern faculty, particularly ones in law, medicine, biological engineering, chemistry and other life-science departments. They also spoke with student advisers, Chicago science industry leaders and alumni.

"We spoke with them about their interactions with people in the sciences and engineering," Tiller said, "to see what skill sets those people need to play a more substantial role as they move up



Leslie Oster



Emerson Tiller

into management and leadership."

As they gathered opinions, a vision of the program took shape — a one-year degree in the law school that would give STEMs a hands-on, practical knowledge of the law.

"There are a lot of STEM-trained people out there with ideas," Oster said, "and if we could teach people how to bring those ideas to market, we would have a positive aspect to the program."

Upon finalizing the framework, Oster and Tiller began designing the details. They settled on three concentrations for the program — intellectual property and patent design, business law and entrepreneurship, regulatory analysis and strategy.

There are areas where the three concentrations overlap, as well as courses that can't be placed into any one category. But overall, there are a number of scenarios that can apply to combinations of the three.

Take, for example, an idea someone has for a medical device.

"That has patent implications, business implications, regulatory implications, entrepreneurship implications — basically every aspect of the program is implicated," Oster said.

That interdisciplinary focus, combined with the program's brevity, is what attracted applicant Amy Garber. The 31-year-old patent agent currently

based in Toledo, Ohio, has a bachelor's degree in engineering from the University of Pennsylvania and later joined the General Electric Global Patent Operation as a consultant in 2006.

She learned about the MSL program in June at the Searle Center Conference on Entrepreneurship and Innovation, where Northwestern's Rodriguez introduced the program.

It was music to Garber's ears.

"As a patent agent, I'm limited in the realm of law I can practice because I'm not an attorney," she said. "You have to be a lawyer to litigate and to prepare license agreements. So a lot of patent agents end up going to law school once they realize there's a cap on how much they can do and how much they can move forward in their career."

Sure enough, enabling STEM-trained individuals to advance in their careers was a priority for Oster and Tiller.

"In a short while, they've moved from not being at the table (for business decisions) to being at the table and being asked to take leadership roles," Tiller said.

"For them to do that effectively they need to communicate with lawyers, with business-development people, and they need to do more upfront thinking about how the trajectory of the technology fits into the business models and the regulatory structures, thus ensuring that their

innovations are profitable.”

The key to the program, Garber said, is that it teaches the practical functions of both law and business, particularly as they pertain to intellectual property.

“The operative word here is ‘property,’ ” she said. “The laws of intellectual property have a direct impact on businesses related to that property. So it’s

important to learn about not only the business aspect of how to create a business around an innovation or to develop a business portfolio around multiple technological innovations but to learn the legal implications as well.”

Before learning about the program, Garber was interested in possibly attending a combined J.D.-MBA program.

Though she will still pursue those degrees if she needs to, learning about Northwestern’s MSL program was a load off her shoulders.

“I’m grateful that there’s an opportunity for me to learn the practical aspects of intellectual property from a business and law perspective in the course of a yearlong program, to actually figure out if I even need to spend

more time in school or if I can go right back into the workforce,” she said.

“If you go to business school, you’re learning about business. If you go to law school, you’re learning about law. This program is an interdisciplinary program, so it’s a comprehensive view of intellectual property. That’s something that I haven’t seen offered anywhere else.”