

Friday, January 2, 2009 | Modified: Monday, January 5, 2009, 8:00am

Albany Law adding classes on the business of being a lawyer

By Adam Sichko

Nathan Sabourin, like most law school students, spent his time at Albany Law School focused on one goal: passing the bar exam.

Now, three months into a job at the Albany law firm Couch White LLP, the 30-year-old Sabourin realizes there's more to law than academics.

"The bar exam is only half the process," said Sabourin, who graduated earlier this year. "The bigger one is all the bar association applications, paying state fees, a lot of the administrative stuff. I was naive about that."

Next month, Sabourin's alma mater will teach students about the "business" side of running a law firm for the first time. It's one of three classes the school is offering in a new, weeklong session created to strengthen student resumes in an increasingly competitive job market.

"It's very practical training that'll really translate into the practice of law," said Connie Mayer, the law school's acting president and associate dean for academic affairs. "It gives them [students] more tools that they wouldn't have otherwise."

Many law schools have added a winter session in recent years, sandwiched between traditional fall and spring semesters.

Albany Law School's version features the course on law practice management, along with a class on military law and a course on real estate that walks students through the process of closing on a house. Courses are worth either one or two credits.

The management class will cover topics including ethics, marketing tactics and writing retainer agreements.

The demand from students is clear: All three classes are full, and each course has a waiting list. One hundred students, or 13 percent of the school's enrollment, will participate in the winter session.

"I didn't expect quite that much of an interest," Mayer said.

Gregory Rinckey, who will teach the management class, says he understands why a law practice management class would be popular.

Rinckey, 35, is managing partner at Tully Rinckey PLLC in Albany. He joined the firm in 2004 after serving as an attorney in the U.S. Army. He said private practice presented new concerns: credit lines, health insurance premiums, writing retainer agreements and marketing tactics.

The class will also cover ethics and management skills. The firm's founding partner, Mathew Tully, pitched the course to Mayer earlier this year.

"It's not just about trying cases. The firm has to be profitable," Rinckey said.

"There's a lot of stuff that junior associates have no clue about," he added, talking about entry-level attorneys. "This class is hands-on, and it will have information that's useful from day one through the end of your career. These are not skills taught in law school."

The class gains added relevance amid the slumping national economy, which is hitting the wallets of consumers and businesses. Rinckey said he will teach students how to structure billing agreements with clients to ensure that attorneys will be paid.

"Clients are studying their bills a lot closer. They're no longer taking a \$300-an-hour attorney," Rinckey said.

The winter session comes at a minimal expense to the law school, Mayer said, although she could not say how much the school will spend on the session.

Mayer said she hopes to turn the management course into a standard, semester-long class.

"The topics you could cover if you had time are much more extensive," Mayer said. "This is one way we hope to enhance the marketability of our graduates."

Allyson Phillips, a 2006 graduate of Albany Law School, said she "absolutely" would have taken the management class if it had been offered. She said she's fortunate to be at a firm that gave her leeway in learning administrative matters on the job.

"There's just things you don't think about in law school until you get out and have actual clients with limited resources," said Phillips, 29 and an associate attorney at Young Sommer Ward Ritzenberg Baker & Moore LLC in Albany.

"There's a business side to it, whether you like it or not," Phillips said. "I don't have much of a head for business, and I'm sure there are a lot of people like me."

Business law - The courses

Law practice management: 40 spots filled; four students on a waiting list

Military law: 20 spots filled; 55 students on a waiting list

Real estate: 40 spots filled; three students on a waiting list

-asichko@bizjournals.com