Courtenay R. Dunn: How is law school different than it was 15 or 20 years ago?

John Y. Gotanda: What law schools have faced in the past several years – the declining job market, the significant drop in applications and a legal profession that has changed in dramatic ways – has caused law schools to re-examine overall what they do, what they teach, how they teach, the student experience itself, and how they institute and spend. At Villanova, we have undertaken that effort and there have been dramatic changes at our law school in all areas.

Today we are providing both broader and deeper skills for our students. The faculty just approved a business module to provide broader skills – exposing students to finance, accounting, marketing and principles of economics. Across the board, we’re going to expose law students to those skills because they are needed in order to practice in a world that’s become a lot more interdisciplinary than it was 10 or 15 years ago.

At the same time, we are looking to provide deeper skills, particularly in terms of writing skills and practical experience. The faculty recently passed a requirement of six semesters of legal writing. In the past, legal writing was taught in a one-year mandatory program. Today, we have an in-depth writing experience for students in each semester of law school. Our goal here is to provide a writing experience and skills that really are second to none.

We have already taken the steps to provide more hands-on, practical experience, particularly with respect to clinics and externships. This semester we piloted a new health law clinic with the nursing school. It’s much more interdisciplinary. At the same time, plans are in the works for a new entrepreneurship clinic.

We also have recently expanded our externship program – in fact, greatly expanded it. We now include placements in private businesses as well as law firms. We have externs this semester at Reed Smith and Wawa. Today our externship program includes placements beyond the Philadelphia area, including at the White House.

The goal here is to provide not only more skills, but also an experience that allows our students to hit the ground running on day one and prepares them to practice throughout their careers.

How do you think the law schools are setting up newly admitted lawyers?

The broader and deeper skills clearly provide recent graduates greater career paths. At Villanova, we have proposed a course called The Business of Law. This is not a course about hanging out your shingle, but instead, it’s designed to ingrain in our students that the practice of law is not only a profession, but it’s...
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also a business.

The genesis of this course came from our discussions with the COOs and managing partners of large, medium and small firms who said that students today need to be better prepared to understand what they’re getting into when they go into practice.

This course will address those concerns, teaching students about business aspects such as firm structure and personnel. It will go through law firm economics, exploring how a time sheet becomes revenue and overhead costs for a law firm and why an associate who makes $80,000 a year needs to generate approximately $240,000 in revenues for the firm to break even on them.

We also want this course to cover alternative fee arrangements, budgeting and project management. Article after article discusses how clients are demanding these business skills of modern law firms.

So we need to teach these skills to students, and we plan to do it in the second year. This gives students the opportunity to work in a firm in the summer and to see how the business operates.

What are you seeing that your law student alumni are doing right?

We have wonderful students. I was looking back at the accomplishments of this graduating class, and it’s rewarding and impressive to see how they’ve developed. This class is incredibly committed in a number of ways. They’re committed to service. One thing we emphasize here at Villanova is that lawyers have a responsibility to serve their communities and that it starts in law school. The students really have picked that concept up and run with it. This year we had the largest service projects during the spring break. They really do love it and are dedicated to serving their communities.

They’re also committed to law school – going above and beyond to look for ways to help improve VLS. They’ve
rolled up their sleeves and said, “How can we help make the program here better?” They modernized the Law Review, bringing the journal online this year. We have the largest percentage of students ever giving to Villanova. And in the third year class, more than 60 percent are giving, which is incredibly impressive.

Similarly, our alumni carry these same traits into practice, particularly with respect to service. Whether it be Gordon Cooney representing a death row inmate or David Worby in New York taking on a case that no one else wanted – the 9/11 responders.

This is who our lawyers are and what they do; it is incredibly gratifying. You also see our graduates in areas beyond the law. They go into business and into government and they’re very successful there as well. They can be a sports agent and owner of a Major League Baseball team like Jeff Moorad. They can be a U.S. senator or the former governor of Pennsylvania. They can be a Third Circuit judge. They can be the head of AFL-CIO, or the president of Jefferson Health Systems. And they can be head of investment at a venture capital firm.

And so our graduates have succeeded in many different areas. It’s incredibly rewarding to see the next generation come up and follow in those footsteps.

**Why should people continue to pursue the practice of law given the tough market?**

I do think this is an exciting time to go to law school. We are in the midst of changes that the legal profession has not witnessed before. Lawyers, particularly Villanova lawyers, are going to be at the forefront of these changes. I think that while there are challenges, there are also incredible opportunities for our students. The legal education students receive, particularly students at Villanova, is incredibly valuable. It not only enables them to practice law, but it also prepares them for a wide range of careers – in business, in government and in many other areas.

A great example is our alum who is head of business development at Google. He doesn’t use the law every day, but he says he does use the skills he learned in law school. He learned in law school how to take in complex facts, to be able to spot issues, to be able to analyze the situation, to come to conclusions and then to be able to articulate it to people in a way that’s understandable. These skills that we teach are so valuable and are transferable to many areas.

**Did you always want to be a law school dean?**

No. I don’t think anyone has a child who wants to be a law school dean. I do think though, like being a professor, that it is an incredibly rewarding job. I often tell my colleagues as well as the alumni and students that being a professor is such a wonderful job because you get to work with students. You get to see them develop into lawyers and then you can see them later grow professionally. You also see this as a dean. Witnessing such growth is what attracted me to legal education.

Oftentimes people comment that fundraising must be one of the worst parts of being a dean. What I found is that it is actually one of the best parts about the job. You get to talk to your alumni and you find out how the school has made an impact in people’s careers. You see that the institution has made real differences in people’s lives and that is incredibly meaningful.

**What did you do before you came to Villanova?**

When I graduated from law school in Hawaii I thought I would always
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remain in Hawaii and practice there. One thing I often tell my students is that life takes many turns and you never know in the end where you’re going to wind up or what you’re going to do.

Some people are fortunate that they pick an area and then that’s where they find fulfillment immediately. Others need to be more flexible, embrace opportunities, and try different things. In my third year of law school, I had the opportunity to go and work in Washington D.C. at the D.C. Circuit. I thought it would be an opportunity to come to the mainland for a few years and then go back to practice corporate law in Hawaii because my background before that was in business.

So I came out to Washington, D.C. I loved working at the D.C. Circuit – just the exposure to the issues and grappling with difficult, complex legal problems at the highest level. I found it fascinating and challenging. And then I had the opportunity to go work at Covington & Burling in Washington, D.C., particularly on international matters. There I was given the chance to try different areas, which was a wonderful experience.

I came to find out that my passion was not for corporate law, but for wrestling with the issues and examining the law in the international litigation context. I loved coming at it, trying to problem solve and looking at a matter from different angles and using creative lawyering to help my clients.

Hawaii is a beautiful place but I think this area, in particular, the Main Line and Philadelphia, is one of the best places to live in the country. It also has an incredibly exciting legal environment, which you can’t find in many places.

**What do you advise your students when it comes to student loans and student debt?**

At Villanova, we want to hold the line on costs. We also want to greatly increase endowments and scholarships so that we can help provide the financial support to students. I think those things are incredibly important.

In the career services area, we have revamped the department. We’ve hired additional people. We hired Jennifer Henfey, a former hiring partner at Blank Rome, to head the office. We’ve also brought on Meg Cranford, who was director of professional recruiting for Pepper Hamilton, to work specifically with the graduating class.

We want to provide the resources for that office to make sure that they have what they need to be successful. And so I think that we need to take the steps, both on the front end to help reduce the costs and after graduation to help them get jobs. We’re going to constantly look at our programs and see how we can do better.

One of the other things we’re doing – and this goes, hand in hand with the bar – is that we’re looking to partner more with the bar to help our students be more successful. We made the decision to pay for the bar association dues for each law student that is interested because of the importance of the networking opportunities, the mentorship opportunities, the program opportunities and career opportunities. All of these are very important to our students and so we need to find ways to reach out to the various bars and practicing lawyers and the community to do that.

In our view, for our students, we believe that this connection to the bar should start at law school and should start very early in law school because we think it’s going to help them overall.
If you could change something about the profession, what would it be?
I think the profession itself is undergoing change because the users of the legal services have demanded it. We’re seeing that from the businesses and general counsels. But it’s also because of other factors such as technology. The practice of law has evolved because of technology and I think that lawyers and the legal profession itself need to embrace these changes. Those who embrace these changes and look for opportunities will thrive in the future.

Another thing the legal profession can do is to work as a partner with businesses to spur innovation. To some extent, law has often been viewed as a hindrance of innovation. That’s not really true in many ways because the protection of property rights, intellectual property rights, actually helps spur innovation. But in many ways, I think the law can be better used as a tool to help businesses grow. If the legal profession focuses on that, it would help the economy and also the profession overall.

Do your children have aspirations for careers in the law?
They are very good at arguing and possibly at times decision shopping. My wife and I both went into law, so we are a little careful. My wife is a partner at Manko, Gold, Katcher & Fox LLP. We love our jobs, and we absolutely love what we do.

At the same time, I think what we want to do is help our children find what’s going to make them happy in the end. It’s also one of the goals here at Villanova Law School. We have to help today’s students find what is going to be their vocation, because if they do that, they will be happier and they will do a better job in whatever they do. For my kids, I want to help them find their calling. I think they could be great lawyers, but is that going to be their vocation? I don’t know. As a parent, you want your kids to find that vocation that’s going to make them happy.

What do you do for fun?
One of the things I do love is to spend time with my family. We were in the Grand Canyon not too long ago. But we don’t have enough opportunities as a family to travel and see different places. There are always pictures of me in places without them. I would love for them to see some of these places.

My kids and I have also taken up fishing recently. They love to do that. It’s wonderful to actually go and do that with my kids now. We’re into trout season. I haven’t caught a trout yet, but my son has.

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