



THE BUSINESS OF LAW

Willamette's new Business Lawyering Institute
prepares tomorrow's attorneys for a changing
world

By Christopher Tritto

Law professors
Karen Sandrik and
Vincent Chiappetta



Willamette University
Trustees Robin Brena
JD/MBA'83 and
Eva Kripalani JD'86.



Willamette University law professors **Karen Sandrik** and **Vincent Chiappetta** knew they were on to something.

It was the spring of 2017, and they had gathered before members of the dean's Leadership Cabinet in downtown Portland. Their goal was to pitch a new approach to equipping law students with problem-solving skills for the business world.

Within 10 minutes the room exploded with dialogue. Participants excitedly batted about all sorts of ideas, scenarios, input and feedback.

"I remember we had a box lunch, and I only ate one bite of my sandwich in an hour," Chiappetta says. "It turned into a mini-roundtable more than a presentation, with good, substantive conversations."

Such preliminary discussions, coupled with rigorous planning, administrative backing and alumni investment, resulted in the early 2018 launch of the College of Law's Business Lawyering Institute, or BLI.

The institute's goal is to prepare the best business lawyers of tomorrow with the recognition that the most effective business attorneys possess not only excellent legal training but also a working knowledge of management, finance, operations, marketing, technology, human resources, social responsibility and other topics that come into play in real-life situations.

Co-directors Chiappetta and Sandrik are also working to make BLI a forum where students, faculty, practicing lawyers and business executives can discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the legal and business communities — now and in the future.

"We often graduate lawyers who can spot everything wrong with a transaction but don't know how to get one done," says Willamette Trustee **Robin Brena JD/MBA'83**, managing shareholder of the Brena, Bell & Clarkson, P.C. law firm in Anchorage, Alaska, and an early investor in BLI. "Business and law don't work in isolation. The future is in interdisciplinary thinking. Applying that to the law, you

need to be able to read financial statements, understand what a client is trying to achieve and then know your role in how to assess risk but get it done. You want to be solution-oriented and someone worth listening to in a business environment."

The importance of adding value to traditional legal expertise became increasingly apparent following the economic downturn of 2008. As businesses took a harder look at their bottom lines and scrutinized expenses, legal costs became a target.

Fewer firms and companies were willing or able to provide the same level of initial training as in the past, and that created a training gap among new law graduates. The emergence of a gig-economy approach to some legal services and the influence of new technologies made it additionally clear that more lawyers need to bring additional value to businesses to hold a seat at the table.

Developing Team Players

That's easier said than done, says **Eva Kripalani JD'86**, chair of the Willamette Board of Trustees' Law Committee and co-founder of Office of General Counsel Network LLC. Law school curriculum has changed little in recent decades, she says, due in part to tradition-bound reluctance to view law as a business and a resulting bias against practical skills training.

"We have an opportunity to eliminate some of the elitism that has not served us well over time," Kripalani says. "A lot of business people look at lawyers and see them as arrogant and a hindrance to getting things done. We want them to say, 'They get it. They are team players.'"

To get there, BLI faculty are offering and developing new classes, planning to partner more closely with the Atkinson Graduate School of Management and the College of Liberal Arts, and building bridges with working professionals.

Willamette Law Dean
Curtis Bridgeman and
Mark Hoyt JD'92.



The Business Lawyering Institute earned praise from attendees at its first formal roundtable discussion event, held in March 2018 at the Oregon Civic Justice Center on the Willamette campus. In a post-event survey, 100

100%
say the College of Law is
**“on the right
track”**

percent of respondents said the College of Law is “on the right track” with the institute.

Respondents also described the roundtable as providing:

**“Excellent and highly
informative presentations.”**

**“Learning and innovations
from fellow participants.”**

**“Valuable mix of diverse
perspectives from legal professions
and the business world.”**

**“Very interesting
business model.”**

Sandrik, for example, teaches a “Deals” class, which frames legal issues around transactions rather than doctrinal areas. She brings in outside lawyers, bankers, accountants, real estate professionals and other business experts to provide case studies and context. Students examine deals including family succession plans, joint collaborations between a biotech and a pharmaceutical company, and an acquisition of a software company. The course has quickly become a popular draw, with waiting lists of interested students.

Chiappetta, building on decades of business law practice and teaching experience, is developing “Lunch in the C-Suite,” a class in which senior executives from various companies discuss real-world business issues with students in an interactive setting.

Dean Curtis Bridgeman and **Professor Jeffrey Dobbins** combined their classes on contracts and civil procedure and employed the help of working practitioners to lead hypothetical case studies where the two legal areas overlap. **Professor Gil Carrasco** recruited professional mediators and a financial advisor to teach strategies of civil and commercial conflict resolution.

And in March, the institute hosted its first formal roundtable discussion among 14 corporate executives, managing partners and in-house counsel professionals to discuss some of the biggest challenges facing legal practice. The group considered ways Willamette can best prepare its students for a changing work environment.

The successful event served as an unofficial milestone that BLI has emerged as more than just a concept.

“You want to be solution-oriented and someone worth listening to in a business environment.”

— Robin Brena JD/MBA'83

“We all come from diverse backgrounds and have different ideas,” Sandrik says. “It has taken us two years to figure out where we can truly have synergy. It’s one thing for academics to be in an echo chamber and get fired up. But at the roundtable we got a lot of other people saying, ‘Yes, we think this is great, too.’ Vince and I had this moment when we thought, ‘This is real now.’”

Sandrik and Chiappetta have been the primary drivers behind BLI, but they share much of the credit with Bridgeman, who encouraged their efforts.

“Many of us started focusing on business lawyering a long time ago,” Chiappetta says. “We wanted to teach our students how practice really works. Curtis was very interested in ways we could expand our expertise and make it more coordinated and organized.”

Cross-pollination Across Campus

Bridgeman says BLI will help better prepare law students, enhance the Willamette Law brand and attract future applicants. But he also expects graduate management students and undergraduates across the university to benefit from the cross-pollination taking place.

“We want lawyers to be good partners with non-lawyers,” Bridgeman says. “We want students to expand their contacts and better understand the people who operate within other fields. Their time in school is a good time to have a little culture clash.”

To help explain and encourage those interactions, BLI faculty selected four inaugural fellows who will serve as ambassadors to other student groups, alumni and outside professionals. Fellows benefit from exposure to experts and potential employers and can

use their position to develop mentors. Through an independent study course being planned, they will work on capstone projects for businesses and present their findings in written and formal presentations to both the company and at an on-campus colloquium. Each fellow receives a small scholarship for his or her participation.

Despite the groundwork laid for BLI, challenges remain. Chiappetta notes a real willingness among faculty and students to modify their approach to legal education, but there is no road map to follow.

“A lot of experimentation has to happen,” Chiappetta says. “Getting people coordinated and together is very resource-intensive. The dean and our outreach people have done a great job of seeding this, and we are seeing what works. Our needs five years from now may be significantly different. But the focus is on our students to give them a real leg-up on being successful.”

Planning for Success

Financial donations and alumni support inside and outside the classroom will be critical to BLI’s evolution and long-range success, says Bridgeman. “We’re especially grateful to our early investors, like **Mark Hoyt JD’92**, for their involvement not only financially but as participants,” he says.

Seed funding of about \$120,000 has been raised so far for BLI’s two-year launch phase, but more is needed.

“We are approaching this with a start-up model. We’ll assess the program as we go, get real-time and long-term feedback from all participants and make adjustments,” Bridgeman adds. “This will give us clarity about the long-term funding we will need to support faculty, fellowships, roundtables, continuing legal education classes and more. Eventually, we would love for BLI to have a dedicated facility in the center of Portland, closer to where the pulse of business activity happens in Oregon.”

Connections between students, faculty, alumni and senior legal and business practitioners, combined with effective two-way communication and regular reality checks, will be the lifeblood of BLI, Chiappetta says.

“If you are going to be a law student today, you need to be able to deal with change and understand the value of legal services in an evolving environment,” he says. “At the center of all of this, we are a law school and we must think about how we can help students be successful.”