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Pro bono on the syllabus

SIU becomes first Illinois law school to require students to do volunteer legal work to graduate

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The term pro bono comes from the Latin phrase “pro bono publico,” meaning “for the public good.” Since those hours aren’t billable, attorneys typically do pro bono work out of the goodness of their hearts.

Soon, students at Southern Illinois University School of Law will be doing it because it’s required.

In October, SIU became Illinois’ first law school to create a pro bono graduation requirement. Starting with incoming freshmen this fall, students must complete 35 hours of pro bono work to get their degree.

The school came up with the number by totaling the pro bono hours its students were already doing.

“The law has always had a mission that included public service,” said Michael Pierre Ruiz, the law school’s assistant dean for career services and special programs and creator of SIU’s Self-Help Center. “Our students go in high percentages to public service jobs.”

Though the school is still determining the parameters of accepted work for its new requirement, officials already have a good sense of what pro bono looks like.

“Our definition of pro bono is that it has to be law-related, uncompensated, supervised by an attorney and not for academic credit,” Ruiz said.

In other words, SIU treats pro bono like the Supreme Court treats pornography: They know it when they see it.

“The word ‘law-related,’ that has a lot of different meanings,” Ruiz said. “We have to define all of these words so that the students understand what counts and what doesn’t. For instance, copying or taking notes or

performing non-clerical tasks may not be law-related.”

No matter the definition, the program is dear to Ruiz’s heart. During his time at the University of Chicago Law School, Ruiz received the school’s public service award and received a similar award from the Illinois State Bar Association in 1993, the year he earned his J.D.

His favorite memories of pro bono work came from working at the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation in his hometown of Murphysboro.

“I came back and worked at that legal aid office while I was in law school,” Ruiz said. “It was that experience that got me to work for them after law school, even when they didn’t have a job open for me.”

He spent four years there. It was an experience that led him to open the Self-Help Center, a call center staffed by student volunteers and law reference librarians ready to help the public with legal questions.

It was through the center that he met Kerriane Waters.

Now an SIU third-year, Waters was one of the students Ruiz consulted when determining the number of required hours. They met a few times a month to pinpoint what they felt would be a “reasonable requirement.”

Waters was already interested in pro bono work prior to meeting Ruiz, but his enthusiasm for the work mixed with the respect he showed her made her even more committed.

“He is very positive. He is very receptive,” Waters said. “Knowing that he treated me as an equal and valued my input, that really speaks to him and his trust of the SIU community and students.”

Randi Burrgraff had the same



Michael Pierre Ruiz

experience. A 2013 SIU law graduate now preparing for the bar exam, Burrgraff met Ruiz through Waters. She was interested in pro bono work because her brother had done some while at SIU.

During her second year she worked in the public defender’s office in Jackson County, conducting research, drafting motions and memos — whatever the attorneys needed. She got her 711 partial law license during her third year, which allowed her to handle matters in court for the Williamson County state’s attorney’s office, where Waters also worked.

“Aside from doing the research, I could do pleas, argue motions, things of that nature,” Burrgraff said.

Waters estimates she has completed 120 pro bono hours during her time at SIU. Burrgraff’s estimated number is even higher — 250 to 300 hours.

Though SIU is the first Illinois law school to make pro bono work a graduation requirement, the other eight schools all encourage the work.

DePaul University College of Law, Northern Illinois University College of Law, The John Marshall Law School and University of Chicago Law School give students official recognition for fulfilling a set number of pro bono hours, generally between 50 and 60.

IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, Loyola University Chicago School of Law and Northwestern University School of Law all share opportunities and resources with students. And the University of Illinois College of Law offers school credit for pro bono work.

To Ruiz, requiring pro bono creates an even greater emphasis on

the work’s importance.

“A lot of our students aren’t going to have much difficulty meeting this requirement,” Ruiz said, noting the school’s 348 students combined in 2013 for 879 hours with 29 students last year winning an award for completing 15 hours or more.

“So why make it a requirement? Because we understood the advantage that pro bono work gives to all students.”

It did for Waters. Her time at the Self-Help Center fielding calls and directing people to resources impacted her as much as her callers.

“I was very scared to start talking to people on the phone my first year of law school, so I was hesitant to do pro bono work,” Waters said. “I volunteered with someone so I wasn’t alone.”

Her confidence grew, as did her love for pro bono. She began volunteering on her own. It was in this capacity that she took a phone call she won’t soon forget.

“A woman called me an ‘angel’ on the phone because I listened to her and directed her to a resource,” Waters said.

The woman was trying to gain guardianship of her grandchildren and didn’t know how to do so legally. One of the children’s parents was incarcerated and the other was out of the picture.

“She had been calling attorneys hoping that they would represent her for free,” Waters said. “I think the demand for family law attorneys is higher than the supply. She really couldn’t find someone who would listen, and that’s where I came in.”

Though Waters eventually directed the woman to resources outlining the rights of grandparents, her first offering was much simpler than specific legal advice.

“When people call, they want to talk to someone and tell their story,” she said. “So I listened to her, took away her main points, reiterated them back to her and then provided her with forms and supplements available through our center.”

Waters remembers the call as “pretty basic” — it was the woman’s gratitude that made it stand out.

“She said that no one had listened to her,” Waters said, “and that she appreciated ... not only that I provided a resource for her but also that I cared.”

For SIU, that’s the best requirement of all.

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