

THE SOCRATIC METHOD MEETS THE AI GENERATION: FUTURES FORUM RECAP

Legal education is struggling with how to respond to AI, with some law schools banning laptops from the classroom and others adding courses on how to apply AI in practice. With that in mind, the College of Law Practice Management's September 24 [Futures Forum session](#) took up a question facing every law school: How do we prepare lawyers not only to practice law in a technology-driven world, but to help shape that world?

Moderator Marla Crawford of Cimplifi was joined by three educators who are building AI programs at their schools now. Cat Moon is Professor of the Practice, co-founder of the Vanderbilt AI Law Lab, and co-director of the Program on Law and Innovation at Vanderbilt Law School. Michael Pastor is Dean for Technology Law Programs at New York Law School, where he co-heads the Innovation Center for Law and Technology and directs the James Tricarico Jr. Institute for the Business of Law and In-House Counsel. And Jeff Ward is an Associate Dean for Technology & Innovation and Associate Clinical Professor of Law at Duke University School of Law, where he also directs the Duke Center on Law and Technology.

HOW ARE LAW SCHOOLS APPROACHING TEACHING AI?

Moon said Vanderbilt has taught this material for a decade through its Program on Law and Innovation, but "it took generative AI to make this stuff cool and popular." She added, "This is not set it and forget it," and requires constant experimentation, which is why Vanderbilt chose a lab format for its generative AI work to encourage iteration.

Pastor agreed that schools are in a period of experimentation, "trying to get a sense for what works, what doesn't, what the students need, what they don't need." Four weeks into his in-house counsel seminar and technology transactions course, he is still working out where AI belongs in his curriculum, if at all, though he has used AI to prepare assignments. New York Law School is approaching AI at all levels, including teachers, students, and administrators, with the most current experimentation in upper-level classes.

Ward described the past several years at Duke as a laboratory of learning. He is encouraged by the strategic school-wide initiatives on AI. Yet they also can be concerning, because law schools rarely reach consensus and a fixed rule may cut the experimentation period short.



I FEEL LIKE WE'RE BARRELLING INTO THIS FUTURE WITHOUT ACKNOWLEDGING THAT EVERY DAY WE ARE MAKING CHOICES THAT CREATE THE FUTURE. THIS IS REALLY REQUIRING A LEVEL OF PROACTIVITY AND INTENTION THAT WE HAVE TO BE VERY AGILE ABOUT, WHICH IS NOT AT ALL OUR NATURE OR HOW WE'VE OPERATED HERETOFORE.

CAT MOON | VANDERBILT LAW SCHOOL

WHAT SKILLS SHOULD LAW STUDENTS BE DEVELOPING?

Ward said he advises his first-year students that they arrived at law school with 95% of what they need to be good lawyers—human skills! He believes that law school should build on that innate skill by teaching judgment and discernment. Students must pay attention to the institutions that lawyers protect and be informed how to use AI, for example, in the criminal system or to increase access to justice.

Moon presented her taxonomy of the AI-competent lawyer, seeing a need to establish consistent language for students and lawyers. “As lawyers, our obligation is competency.” In her framework, AI literacy and AI fluency are part of a lawyer’s obligation to exercise professional discernment, a requirement that preexists AI. To her, it is “the reason why we are relevant and will continue to be relevant no matter what AI can do.”

Pastor added that schools “should not be in the business of training law students who don’t care about the world that they live in and the world that they help create.”



WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR TRAINING STUDENTS AND YOUNG LAWYERS?

Responsibility for training, Ward said, can't rest with outside AI providers, and the profession shouldn't "defer to them or abdicate our position." Yet much of the AI training his students received over the summer came from those providers. That training can be practically useful, but it is narrow, teaching students to use "an instance of a tool in this moment." Students also may not be taught how to incorporate AI into their workflows or how to think critically about it. He added, "AI can be one of the better teachers you've ever had if you use it correctly, but we need to give people space for that learning."

Pastor called summer AI training "the wild, wild West." Student experience ranged from not using AI at all to training on AI tools by outside providers. He tells students that they should be sharing their knowledge with each other and added that law schools should also be considering how to incorporate AI knowledge into students' experience.

Moon pointed out that much of the funding into legaltech companies supports tools for corporate law firms and is taking up a lot of the oxygen in the room. If the AI conversation is only about tasks and efficiency, "then we are handing over our futures to technology." Moon said legal education should help students understand that the law is "a living, breathing, human thing that humans created," and that the community should be clear about our values.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

When the panel was asked to close on positive things they're seeing, Pastor said working with students who come in "laying it on the line for the dreams that they have" makes optimism easy. He thinks this generation may adjust well, "provided that we help them." Students need reminding that "It's not going to be with the chatbot that they really reach their maximum potential. It's with the mentors, it's with their friends, it's with their family."

Moon said her students are overwhelmingly focused on how they build and maintain the human relationships and expect their futures to be shaped by them rather than a chatbot, which she said makes her "very happy and optimistic."

Ward said AI may take over some of the law's drudgery and leave lawyers more time for what he called human-centered lawyering. He also sees an opening with access to justice, where the profession has a poor record. "Every profession needs engines of renewal, and this is a moment of renewal for us," though it won't happen by accident. With enough attention and care, the profession might be able to say that "In 2050, more people get served by our profession."



Young lawyers may be among those most at risk as AI reshapes legal practice. Many of the tasks that have traditionally given junior associates the experience they need to develop as lawyers are changing quickly, and the way today's law students ultimately practice is likely to look very different from the way lawyers practice today.

Law schools and law firms have never been perfectly aligned when it comes to preparing new lawyers for practice. Despite summer associate programs and other efforts, many graduates still arrive at firms without a strong understanding of how law firms work or how to serve clients. AI threatens to widen that gap.

However, with students eager to be mentored and interested in developing the human skills and relationships needed for success, and law schools and law firms starting to work together to rethink how young lawyers are trained, there is a real opportunity for educators and senior attorneys to help junior lawyers offer new value at precisely the moment when AI is already putting pressure on their traditional role.

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