THE BIG IMPACT OF “SOFT SKILLS”
Keystone Professionalism and Leadership Program trains students to be future leaders in the legal profession

By Meredith Heagney
When you are a new lawyer, a simple meeting with a senior colleague can be fraught with potential pitfalls. Before you even get to his or her office, there are questions: Wear the suit jacket or not? Is it OK to bring the cup of coffee? Will you call your colleague by his or her first name, or as Mr. or Ms. So-and-So? You must remember to take a lot of notes and to ask questions if you don’t understand an assignment. You have to be aware of any intergenerational differences that might arise in conversation. For example, does “be in touch” mean by email or in person?

If the answers to these questions sound rather obvious to you, you probably aren’t a new lawyer. But you likely remember what it’s like to commit the dreaded “rookie mistake.” They’re all too common when a bright but inexperienced law student becomes a full-time, real-life attorney.

“What the Keystone Program Does Is Give Them a Number of Opportunities to Develop Skills That They Can’t Develop in the Classroom. That Will Help Them No Matter Where They Work.”

Fortunately, a relatively new program at the Law School exists to help our students learn the practical skills that aren’t imparted in the classroom but are essential for workplace success. The Keystone Professionalism and Leadership Program is beginning its third year of offering informative, broad, and sometimes even fun programming for students who recognize the importance of these skills.

It was developed by the Office of the Dean of Students with help from the Office of Career Services and faculty, all of whom heard from employers that these so-called “soft skills”—interpersonal communication, practical skills, career management—were indispensable in new attorneys. The program also stresses the importance of developing leadership skills early in one’s career.

Students attend a wide range of programs, from mock cocktail networking receptions to Microsoft Office training, and earn points for attendance and participation. If they get to 200 points in seven out of 10 categories of events (see sidebar) by year’s end, they’re recognized at a lunchtime ceremony sponsored by Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.

In Keystone’s inaugural year, 2011–2012, 115 programs organized by law school administrators and student organizations qualified for Keystone points and 90 students completed the program. Last year, there were 86 programs and 70 students were recognized for completing the program. To earn points, students volunteered with service groups, completed the Myers-Briggs personality type test, and conversed with alumni leaders in various fields over lunch. Several judges spoke at Keystone programs, on topics such as professionalism and oral advocacy. The law librarians gave students tips on research areas such as mergers and acquisitions, and Second City’s director of outreach lead improvisational activities that taught students to think on their feet and the importance of active listening. One of the categories is “The Well-Rounded Lawyer,” so students also received Keystone points for attending sessions on time management and maintaining personal relationships.

All of this helps ensure that law students will be more ready to enter the workforce, said Chuck Smith, Partner at Skadden Arps and a member of the class of 1987. Smith has spoken at both annual awards luncheons so far.

“One of the issues young lawyers face is that often it’s the first ‘real’ job they’ve held,” Smith said. “And even if it’s not the first real job they’ve held, legal offices are a unique environment. What the Keystone program does is give them a number of opportunities to develop skills that they can’t develop in the classroom. That will help them no matter where they work.”

New lawyers may not be leaders in their offices yet, but it’s critical to start preparing from day one for leadership roles down the line, Smith added.

“The fact is, whether it’s a law firm or a company or the Justice Department or the SEC, they are making judgments...
about your leadership potential from the moment you walk into the door. Focusing on developing the mindset of becoming a leader in law school helps.”

Smith spoke affectionately—and knowingly—about the stereotypes that sometimes accompany a University of Chicago degree.

**THE LEADERSHIP COMPONENT IS REALLY INTENDED AS A SEED THAT BLOOMS LATER IN THE STUDENT’S CAREER.**

“Our reputation is as a school that prepares people better than anybody else intellectually. But historically, our reputation also has been as an institution that did not prepare students well for the other skills that are necessary in a work environment. There’s a reason we were called ‘U of C geeks,’ and we carry that as a badge of pride. But it is an impediment to success if you don’t find ways to accommodate your personality to the workplace.”

When Dean of Students Amy Gardner started in her current role in 2010, the Law School had some professionalism and leadership programming but no unified initiative. Together with Shannon Bartlett, Associate Director of Student Affairs, and the Office of Career Services, Gardner spoke to law firms, nonprofits, corporations, and other employers about what skills students needed to develop to be the best employees after graduation. They checked out professional development programs at other law schools and at law firms. Keystone operates much like the Continuing Legal Education (CLE) programs for licensed attorneys.

Gardner, a 2002 graduate who worked at Skadden herself before becoming a partner at Ungaretti & Harris, saw a lot of “basic things that tripped up junior associates” when she was practicing. “If someone had pulled them aside and told them, they wouldn’t have made that mistake.”

The leadership component is really intended as a seed that blooms later in the student’s career, she added. New graduates may not start out hosting client dinners or litigating in a high-profile case, but “our goal is that three or five or seven years after they graduate, the Keystone

1Ls play improvisation games during Second City Improv Communication Training, which was intended to teach them leadership tools and creative communication strategies.
“program will have made a difference,” she said.

Professor Todd Henderson became convinced of the need for a program like Keystone after talking to his friends from the Law School (he graduated in 1998) who are now leaders in law firms and businesses. They said law students needed more practical, experiential lessons, not just theory and complicated legal reasoning. Legal education was once almost exclusively pragmatic, Henderson said, and some wonder if it’s swung too far the other way; it’s solely bookish and theoretical, and it lacks the basic nuts-and-bolts of being an attorney.

For example, Henderson said, he once watched a recording of a 1960s Elements class taught by Karl Llewellyn, who talked on the first day of class about client service and being a professional. In contrast, Henderson said, “my first day of Elements with Cass Sunstein in 1995 was philosophy and legal theory, the hardcore academic stuff.”

The Law School should not be a “trade school,” Henderson said, but it is important to teach students these “soft skills which everyone agrees are valuable.” Keystone does that. In fact, Henderson said, it gives students a chance to use their extraordinary minds in the most effective way.

“The really important work is the high-class brain work, and we know our students can do that. But an impediment to doing the high-class brain work is the other stuff—acting a certain way, dressing a certain way, behaving a certain way in a professional context. If you don’t do that, you can’t do the high-class brain work. Your ability to be a star is diminished for superficial reasons.”

Employers are looking for young lawyers they can integrate into a team quickly, said Lois Casaleggi, Senior Director of the Office of Career Services. Partners wonder, she said, “does this person have the professionalism and the judgment to put in front of a client?” On the flip side,

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**KEYSTONE, BY THE NUMBERS**

Founded: September 2011

- Number of Keystone programs in first two years: 201
- Students who have completed the program: 160
- Alumni who have participated: More than 160

**PROGRAM CATEGORIES, WITH A SAMPLING OF EVENTS**

**SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY**
- Class of 2015 Service Day
- Volunteer with Neighbors, the student service organization

**PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT**
- Address on professionalism by Justice Shelvin Louise Marie Hall, Illinois Appellate Judge
- Omar Ashmawy, former Guantanamo Bay prosecutor, on ethics

**MANAGING AND BUILDING YOUR CAREER**
- Ensuring Summer Success, with representatives from Sidley Austin, Schiff Hardin, Jenner & Block, and Neal, Gerber & Eisenberg
- Perfecting Your Professional Image Business Dress Program at Macy’s

**LEARNING FROM LEADERS IN THE PROFESSION**
- Ted Ullyot, then General Counsel at Facebook, on “Reflections on Diverse Careers in the Law”
- Sheli Rosenberg, a partner at Skadden, on “What Every Woman Lawyer Should Know”

**INTERPERSONAL SKILLS**
- Judge Michele F. Lowrance, Circuit Court of Cook County, on interpersonal communications

**PRACTICAL SKILLS**
- Microsoft Office Training

**ORAL COMMUNICATION**
- U.S. District Court Judge Edmond E. Chang on effective oral advocacy
- Second City improv training

**LEGAL RESEARCH**
- D’Angelo Law Library training on specialized research topics

**WRITTEN COMMUNICATION**
- Patrick Barry, ’12, on writing substantive papers

**THE WELL-ROUNDED LAWYER**
- Eating for a Better You
- The Importance of Being Financially Fit
“It’s kind of an arms race,” he said. “We could agree not to do it, so long as every other university agreed not to do it either. Our students are competing with students at other schools for jobs. Employers demand it.”

As Keystone’s reputation grows, it is becoming a badge of honor on a resume, Gardner said. One firm told her that they gave 10 offers last year and eight were Keystone students. “I think it’s a signal that you appreciate the importance of professionalism and leadership,” Gardner said.

Sometimes, the benefits are tangible even before graduation. In October, students participated in Keystone’s Oral Advocacy Boot Camp. Participants spent an intensive four hours at Jenner & Block, where partner Michael Brody, ’83, gave a presentation on oral advocacy. The students were given two matters on which to argue; first, the question of whether a burrito is a sandwich, and then, a more involved case with a long set of facts. Each student argued in front of attorneys acting as judges, received feedback, and then argued again in front of a different panel.

Two of the participants, Sarah Staudt, ’13, and Michael Turkel, ’14, went on to win the yearlong, highly competitive program.

“Smith, from Skadden Arps, has seen it himself. “I can’t tell you the number of times over the years I’ve handed a pad and paper to a young associate across the table,” he said. He’s also had to explain that “in-person communication is better than telephone communication, and telephone communication is better than electronic communication. You build relationships face-to-face, not by email or instant message or Facebook.”

Ten years ago, there was more time to mature on the job because the market was more robust, Bartlett said. Virtually everyone could obtain a decent job, and there was more time to battle the learning curve once you got there. Now, even the best students need to show right away that they have the skills that will make them easy to work with and teach.

Henderson agreed that these lessons can’t wait for on-the-job training.
“I saw quickly that I needed to be OK with asking that partner, do you want me to approach it way A or way B, so I’m not going down the rabbit hole,” she said. “The worst thing is working on it for days on end and realizing that you’re working in the wrong direction.”

Some faculty and staff say they have seen a subtle but discernable change in the students since Keystone began. For Professor Anthony Casey, it’s in the e-mails. He’s getting a lot more messages that start with, “Dear Professor” instead of just “hi” or even the less formal “hey,” he said.

“I think a decent number of people have noticed that students are a little more aware of the way they interact with someone, and that they need to be formal with someone until they tell you not to be,” he said.

Some of the Keystone programs encourage student growth by offering instant feedback. For example, a Mock Cocktail Reception in April required students to mingle with Law School alumni while various administrators looked on. The students networked for a while, practiced moving in and out of multiple conversations gracefully, and then took a break and heard feedback on how they did. After that, they did it again.

“Moving in and out of groups is always a tricky thing, and people definitely got better at doing it,” Casaleggi said. She said she has seen an increasing understanding among students that these interpersonal skills matter.

So has Gardner, who thinks the students value Keystone despite the many obligations and stressors of being in law school.

“It can be easy to get distracted and so wrapped up in grades, the Socratic method, and whether you’re going to get called on in class,” she said. “This reminds them why they’re really here: to get the kind of jobs our alumni have and to make a difference in the legal profession.”