

A degree in law without the bar exam

St. Mary's offering to debut in fall

By Maria Luisa Cesar STAFF WRITER

Ever face a legal conundrum at work that didn't quite require an attorney but left you and your colleagues scratching your heads?

Well, there's a degree for that.

St. Mary's University will introduce a graduate program this fall for those who work in areas that often intersect with the law, like health care, business, education, finance and energy.

The 30-credit-hour master's degree isn't for those who want a law license but is designed to prepare "midcareer" employees to better tackle job decisions that touch on legal issues.

It represents "the evolution of American law schools" to respond to the market, St. Mary's School of Law Dean Stephen M. Sheppard said.

"St. Mary's has to serve the needs for legal education in South Texas, and this is part of that need," Sheppard said, adding that the degree will connect programs within the school to share knowledge and resources.

Those working in finance might need a deeper understanding of compliance laws, while knowledge of intellectual property rights could help those in the technology sector, said Colin Marks, a St. Mary's law professor who directs the program.

"It's not always obvious until you start talking with people in different industries how much they interact with the law," Marks said. "I don't know many fields that wouldn't benefit from knowing about contract law."

Marks calls the degree plan the "Cadillac of graduate programs" because students will be given individualized attention and learn alongside students pursuing law degrees. He said the first class will be capped at 12 so he can meet with each student to carve out professional goals and ensure the program is aligned with their needs.

The coursework is already being tailored to specific industries with the help of the local community and corporate employers, Marks said. Seven "task forces" of law school alumni and business leaders have been created to identify industries whose employees would benefit from the degree and the coursework needed to make their knowledge relevant.

"I think we are looking at a program with concentrations that are exceptionally valuable to our economy, our culture and our town," Sheppard said.

Brant Mittler, a San Antonio attorney who got a law degree after a career as a cardiologist, said he thinks there would be "major appeal" for these graduates at area hospitals or research institutions. Knowledge of intellectual property law might be important to scientists who are developing patents at places like the University of Texas Health Science Center, he added.

"It takes people who are going to work in systems or even corporate entities and basically teaches them how to think like a lawyer and have an appreciation for regulatory law, compliance law and administrative law without having to become a full blown lawyer," Mittler said.

The degree, which can be completed in one year as a full time student, will cost about \$30,000, Marks said. Evening and weekend classes will be available to working professionals.

"I said that it's the Cadillac of degrees and its cheaper than a Cadillac, right?" Marks said, adding that the university hopes to bring down the cost in the future as the program grows. mcesar@express-news.net