Elon University School of Law Preceptor Program: A Model for Engaged Learning in Legal Education and Professional Development

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**The Preceptor Program**

Starting with its charter class, Elon School of Law has provided its students with a unique learning opportunity. Based on the use of preceptors in medical education, Elon's Preceptor Program pairs first-year law students with practicing lawyers who serve as their coaches and mentors for the duration of the first academic year. Lawyer volunteers from a variety of practice settings facilitate students' development of skills necessary for legal careers. Preceptors introduce students to the legal environment outside of the law school and play a role in the beginnings of the transition from law student to lawyer.

The pairings are random, except that all students assigned to a preceptor have the same class schedule. The students meet with their preceptor once or twice a month to discuss law school and law practice. Preceptors observe one or two classes a semester and meet with students after class to discuss the student's performance, if the student answered a question in class, or to discuss how the student prepared for class. Preceptors coach students so they can best prepare for class and law study. In addition to classroom observations, preceptors introduce students to law practice. Students meet preceptors in their offices and in the courthouse. They are introduced to law partners and judges, prosecutors and opposing counsel. With clients’ permission, they observe mediations, depositions, and client conferences. They learn how law firms bill and manage their practices. They attend local bar and Inns of Court meetings. They tour the state and federal courthouses. They are invited to meet for coffee or lunch and talk about the profession and law study.

**The Preceptors**

Between 45 and 55 lawyers from the area serve in the preceptor program each year. Each is assigned two or three first-year law students. The preceptors have been managing partners, young associates, solo practitioners, assistant attorney generals, assistant state public defenders, federal public defenders, litigators, mediators, family law specialists, intellectual property lawyers, and bankruptcy lawyers.

Prior to the opening of the law school in the fall semester of 2006, a general mailing to solicit preceptor participation was sent to all members of the state bar practicing law in the county. In addition, the law school administrative team made
personal requests of those who seemed particularly interested or well suited to service as a preceptor. The program materials specify that preceptors are chosen by the Dean of the law school. As a practical matter, they are mostly self-selected. Lawyers hear about the program from other lawyers mid-semester and call to express interest in participating next time around.

Preceptors meet for training twice a year, once in August at the beginning of the fall semester and once in January at the beginning of the spring semester. Preceptors meet over sandwiches to hear from law professors interested in excellent mentoring, leadership professors interested in leadership development through coaching, and leadership coaches who instruct preceptors on how to give meaningful and constructive feedback. Feedback training teaches the situation-behavior-impact model of feedback, a model that is similar to that used by trainers for the National Institute of Trial Attorneys. Faculty members explore the assessment/challenge/support technique for leadership development with the preceptors. Students conduct panel discussions to address the practicalities of communication and meaningful engagement with them. Other trainings have explored the Myers-Brigg Type Indicator and its application to law practice and law study, and the use of Individual Development Plans by students to further their evolution from law students to successful lawyers. Continuing preceptors have given pointers on how to communicate with students and how to plan successful lawyering activities for their assigned students. At the January mid-year meeting, preceptors are asked to give feedback on the program, answering questions about the program’s strengths and weaknesses and areas that need improvement.

Student Assessment of the Program

First-year law students are asked to report on their participation in the preceptor program before fall break so that the program director can address any issues. Sometimes there are communication difficulties or personality mismatches to be addressed. The director meets with students who have concerns, the most common being that the preceptor is too busy to meet or that the students think they are too busy to meet.

Benefits for Students

Students who meet regularly with their preceptor report a greater understanding of how legal doctrine applies in law practice. Students are given a sampling of law practice as they begin law study, instead having to wait until the summer following their first year to explore the law practice. Preceptors coach students through classroom recitations and case briefing. They invite students to mock employment interviews and introduce them to their law partners and colleagues in practice. They arrange for students to observe lawyers at work, something many students have never experienced before law school. They provide feedback for students in an environment that has traditionally been void of feedback until the end of semester exam. Some even deliver cookies to students during exam study. Preceptors have served as ambassadors for the law school and law students.

Benefits for Preceptors

Preceptors seem intrinsically motivated to work with their junior colleagues. Several preceptors have volunteered for four or five years. Preceptors have the satisfaction of helping a junior colleague in transition from law study to law practice. They are able to convey and model collegiality and civility among members of the bar. They can contribute positively to our system of legal education and be stimulated by contact with the academy. They become acquainted with the faculty and are sometimes invited to participate in classes and panels. Preceptors occupy a position of distinction at the law school. They are invited to meet visiting dignitaries and speakers at special receptions, and to attend ceremonies, celebrations, and graduation.
How to Start a Preceptor Program at Your School

If you’d like to start a preceptor program at your law school, suggest the program to your law school administrators, in particular your student affairs office, and consider ways that they can help you create a program. Ask the dean of the law school for her endorsement of a preceptor program. Ask faculty for their support, especially those who have taught for many years and are likely to know alumni. Consider asking the law alumni association at your school to participate in creating and running a preceptor program. Local alumni will be well situated to help recruit other lawyers to serve as preceptors for your program. Consider asking local bar leaders and judges to champion the program, helping you recruit preceptors and recognizing their participation. Have a structured program, with suggested activities, suggested frequency for meetings, a contact for questions and concerns, and a meaningful feedback system.

Once your program is operational, ensure that students commit to participate and honor their commitment. Volunteers want to know that their time is well spent. Likewise, provide a back-up plan for preceptors who find themselves unable to continue in the program mid-semester. Consider regular training. Schedule an annual appreciation event with exclusive access to a guest speaker. Incorporate your volunteers into the life of the law school and appreciate their service. Introduce them to the dean and your board of advisors or trustees. Understand what motivates lawyers in your area to volunteer (free CLE? use of the law library?) and incorporate that motivation in your planning. Understand what lawyer mentoring programs already exist and seek to enhance them by adding preceptors for law students.

Most of all, make the program interesting, engaging, and fun for lawyers, faculty, and students. The rewards are great and will become increasingly apparent as your preceptor program grows.

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1 Talbot D’Alemberte, former law dean and university president, former Chair of the ABA Section of Legal Education and Admission to the Bar and past president of the American Bar Association, suggested that legal education could learn from the use of preceptors in medical education. D’Alemberte shared a draft article, "Preceptorships for Legal Education: Learning from Medical Education," with Leary Davis, Founding Dean of the Elon University School of Law prior to the admission of Elon’s first class of law students. Dean Davis initiated the Preceptor Program at Elon Law with the charter class.