By Bethany Krajelis
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David Zarfes still remembers the look on the faces of his students when he used legal terms like “indemnity” and “subrogation” during one of his transactional courses a few years ago.

They appeared “confounded,” said Zarfes, the associate dean for corporate and legal affairs at the University of Chicago Law School.

Prior to joining the law school in 2007, Zarfes practiced corporate law and served as general counsel of a Paris-based firm.

“I was surprised to find that students didn’t know these terms or weren’t familiar with them in a practical sense,” he said.

While he knew this same look of confusion appeared on the faces of law students across the nation, Zarfes made it a mission to change that situation in his classroom.

After providing the students in his courses with more practical assignments and lessons, Zarfes in 2009 expanded his work by founding the Corporate Lab with Sean Z. Kramer, a former student, and Michael L. Bloom, who at that time was teaching at the law school through a deferral program.

Zarfes said they wanted to give law students the skills that firms and groups like the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching said are often lacking in recent law school graduates and first-year associates.

The Carnegie Foundation released a report a few years ago, criticizing law schools for teaching students how to think without showing them how to apply those lessons in the real world.

Zarfes said the Corporate Lab meets the demands of that report and continues to grow as the economic downturn forces law students to find ways to make themselves stand out in the competitive job market.

“This is a real-world practical course,” Zarfes said. “It’s the kind of work you’d see as a first or second-year associate.”

The Corporate Lab provides these practical skills to students with the help of some of the world’s biggest companies.

Kramer, an associate at Kirkland & Ellis LLP, was a student in one of Zarfes’ classes that preceded the Corporate Lab.

He said Zarfes partnered up with the general counsel at Microsoft Corp. to give him and the other students projects to work on for the company.

Kramer said the projects gave them the chance to delve into actual issues, meet with clients and see how corporate law worked in real life — as opposed to just learning about it through reading assignments.

That is the same model the Corporate Lab works under today, except it has greatly expanded, said Kramer, who serves as a lecturer in law for the lab.

When Kramer was in one of Zarfes’ classes, he said he was one of about a dozen students, all of whom worked on projects for Microsoft.

The lab has since grown to include about 70 students and 10 corporate partners, he said.


Bloom, who serves as a lecturer in law and executive director of the lab, attributes the growth
of the program to several things.

Citing the Carnegie Foundation report, he said law schools have pushed in recent years to offer more clinical types of experiences to students.

Many law schools offer criminal and legal aid clinics and trial advocacy programs, but Bloom said he believes the University of Chicago remains the only law school in the area that offers a clinical experience focused on corporate law.

Bloom said the economy and tough job market spur more of an interest from companies that want to get projects completed at a low cost and mentor students who may one day be their employees.

“I think this is a win for everyone involved,” Bloom said of the Corporate Lab.

David P. Scharf, general counsel at Baxter International, said this is his company’s second year working with the corporate lab and he couldn’t be more pleased with the partnership.

“It’s a great opportunity for us and a great opportunity for the students,” he said. “They are a group of highly motivated and well supervised students who do a range of projects for us.”

Scharf said all of the projects his company has the Corporate Lab students complete involve questions that the company’s lawyers have and need answered.

“This is real work that needs to be done,” he said. “It gives my team a chance to mentor students and gives the students a chance to do something they probably wouldn’t do for a few more years.”

Miles Chan, a 3L at the University of Chicago Law School who doubles as a student director of the lab, said he got involved in the lab as a 2L.

He said he wanted an opportunity to get some professional experience and heard good things about the lab from other students.

Chan said he already took the maximum amount of credit hours for the Corporate Lab, but continues to be involved in a leadership position, despite getting no extra course credit.

“I think that speaks to how much I think of the lab,” he said.

Instead of learning about contracts through a book or case law, Chan said the lab gave him an opportunity to see real contracts from real companies.

His experiences with the lab, he said, made him a better summer associate. He said the lab taught him practical skills about e-mail etiquette and how to run a conference call and work with lawyers and clients.

“The corporate lab gives you what can’t be taught in the classroom,” Chan said. “From my experiences, it has been the best practical experience I have gotten out of law school.”

Stephen L. Ritchie, a partner at Kirkland & Ellis, isn’t directly involved in the corporate lab, but said he supports its mission.

As someone who is active in the firm’s recruitment efforts, Ritchie said law firms attempt to find new transactional lawyers who possess some practical experience when they start at a firm.

“The Corporate Lab is one way the University of Chicago is helping with that,” he said. “That’s why I like it.”