

## Legal service provider offers residency to law school graduates

Notre Dame dean says full-scale post-graduation training program would not be economically feasible or necessary

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In 2013, John Farmer, former dean of Rutgers Law School, advocated for “scrapping the system” and requiring law school graduates to complete a two-year residency, much like medical school graduates.

He proposed law firms hire the graduates at reduced rates, have them do entry-level work and at the end of two years, keep the ones they want. Farmer saw this as a way to give law school graduates practical training that they need to represent clients.

A program run by UnitedLex, a legal outsourcing services provider based in Kansas City, Kansas, is following that model. Initially launched as a pilot program in 2013, the legal residency program accepts graduates from top law schools and gives them hands-on experience using technology to do e-discovery, project management and cybersecurity. It officially launched and expanded to more schools in 2015.



Dearing

Joseph Dearing, UnitedLex executive vice president of global legal solutions in the academy division, described the residency as training the graduates in foundational skills. Calling it a “bridge to prac-

tice,” he said the program teaches the residents the skills such as discovery and document review they no longer learn at law firms. Technological advances and clients’ demands to keep costs low have forced many firms to either enlist

outside vendors to do the labor-intensive work or hire contract attorneys rather than assigning the tasks to first-year associates.

“You can be the smartest lawyer out of law school but unless you have basic foundational training on how the theoretical stuff is applied in a real, live client meeting, you’re at a significant disadvantage,” Dearing said.

UnitedLex is drawing its residents from six law schools around the country. University of Miami School of Law was the first to partner and Notre Dame Law School joined in January 2016.



Newton

Notre Dame Dean Nell Jessup Newton was intrigued by UnitedLex’s program because of its emphasis on technology. However, she said not many graduates have taken an interest in being a resident, largely

because the program does not have a location in Chicago, where many new lawyers from the South Bend school want to practice.

As for the idea of a post-graduation residency for J.D. holders, Newton takes a pragmatic view. While a required broad-based residency for every law school graduate is appealing, it is not feasible without large-scale funding.

“It’s a nice idea, but how would it actually work?” Newton questioned. “We couldn’t ask students to volunteer for two years. How would they live?”

Through the Thomas L. Shaffer Public Interest Fellowship and the Bank of America Foundation Community Sustainability Fellowship, Notre Dame

Law School supports graduates who take jobs at public interest and legal aid organizations. The programs covers the salaries of the graduates working at qualifying nonprofits but, Newton noted, the fellowships are very competitive and each can accept only two students from each graduating class.

UnitedLex hires its residents full time and pays them between \$45,000 and \$60,000 per year, Dearing said. The participants have no obligations, so they can either leave at any time or stay the full two years.

Without the UnitedLex program, Dearing said the new lawyers would either not have gotten any training or would have been working at jobs they do not want. He pushed back against the assertion that the graduates from these law schools would have other opportunities, saying the employment rate has fallen and even top students are having trouble finding positions.

Moreover, the traditional career path in the legal profession is changing, he continued. No longer are law firm associates assured of becoming partners after six or eight years, so some new graduates are looking for alternative legal careers, especially those that involve technology.

“These smart new lawyers are looking at the legal environment and really starting to ask the question of ‘Do I really want to do the traditional law firm thing?’” Dearing said.

Cassie Grove, a 2013 graduate of The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law, left her position with the Ohio Office of Families and Children to join the UnitedLex residency program in February 2014, when it was still a pilot project. She was attracted by the focus on

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technology and spent much of her two years learning e-discovery and how to manage discovery projects.



Grove

Shortly before her residency ended, she accepted a permanent position with UnitedLex and is now a litigation manager for the company. She works with in-house legal departments to design strategies for doing discovery in large litigation cases.

“It was equal parts training and mentoring,” Grove said of her residency. “They throw you out there and see what happens, but they make sure you have a life raft.”

“It’s not anything I thought I’d be doing when I graduated from law school, but I really enjoy it,” Grove said. “I think (the residency) is a really great opportunity to learn the skills that clients and law firms are looking for.”

UnitedLex started its residency program to better screen potential permanent employees. With the apprenticeship, the company can see which graduates are a good fit, Dearing explained, while noting the program provides an advantage to the residents who — with the technological training they receive — are more attractive to law firms. As of March 2017, UnitedLex has hired 241 lawyers from the residency program.

Like Newton, Dearing conceded funding is the barrier to instituting a residency program for all law school graduates although with the evolution of the legal profession, he said lawyers would

benefit by learning the technology. He speculated the American Bar Association and state bar associations could possibly emulate what UnitedLex is doing.

However, Newton is not convinced full-scale residencies are needed for lawyers.

“(It’s) not even necessary to have an apprenticeship program,” she said. “I think most kids out of law school can get some training on the job.”

Grove has friends who are working in law firms but seeing them start to focus on particular practice areas, like real estate and mergers and acquisitions, she is happy with her decision to do the residency. She likes that her job includes a regular dose of variety, with opportunities to learn about new subjects and work with different companies.

“I would stay with the company as long as there is opportunity for growth,” Grove said. •