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UA program lets students simulate real world

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The small conference room was full of aspiring lawyers, but three-piece business suits had no place here.

Instead, flip flops and jeans prevailed Thursday as the University of Arizona's Business/ Law Exchange program wrapped up its first semester of providing entrepreneurship and law students with simulated real-world experience.

"As entrepreneurship students realize their ventures, they need to address legal issues. They need to know how to engage the legal community," said Sherry Hoskinson, co-director of the program and director of the UA's McGuire Center for Entrepreneurship.

After scanning universities across the country for programs that bring business and law students together, Hoskinson found one she was convinced equipped students with the skills they would need to succeed. Working closely with Darian Ibrahim, associate professor in the James E. Rogers College of Law, the Business/Law Exchange was created, and the UA's first mock law firm was born.

The program splits up 19 teams of entrepreneurship students among eight third-year law students, who counsel the teams on issues like intellectual property, technology transfer and employment.

The entrepreneurship students develop business plans as part of their final exam, which is presented to 35 judges composed of local business leaders, venture capitalists, UA faculty and business school alumni.

"It's not 'American Idol,' but the judges can be brutal," said instructor Larry Hecker, on the law college's adjunct faculty. In the past, judges have criticized business teams for leaving important legal issues unaddressed, Hoskinson said. She hopes the Business/Law Exchange will change that.

The law students benefit as much as the business students do, Hecker said. "Law school doesn't teach you how to sit down and interact with a client," he said.

The class is designed to emulate the real world as closely as possible, Hoskinson said. The law students identify issues the business teams should address, and the business students call whenever legal problems arise. If a problem is outside a law student's expertise, the business team comes to the classroom session to give all the law students a chance to advise.

"We got a great experience as to what it would be like to start our own law firm," said law student Ben Gross. "I'd like to see what a well-oiled machine it has become in five years."

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