"Change, indeed, is painful, yet ever needful . . ."
—Thomas Carlyle, 19th-century English essayist, historian and philosopher

In some ways, not much has changed in the 200 years since Thomas Carlyle penned his musings. Change, indeed, is still painful and often resisted. When the School of Law administration initiated an extensive review of its curriculum, they anticipated rancorous debate and even dissension in the ranks. They discovered, however, an energetic faculty willing to cast a critical eye on the curriculum and take the necessary steps to create a better legal education for the coming generations.

Thirty years have passed since the curriculum came under comprehensive scrutiny at the University of Maryland. Rena Steinzor, professor and co-director of the Environmental Law Clinic, leads the review efforts although she admits having known little about the subject before being asked to chair the review committee.

"I was off in my own little corner of the universe," Steinzor says. "What I knew about law school curricula was frozen in time in the late '70s when I graduated from Columbia University." The exhaustive study began in fall 1999 and included the examination of the nation's top 20 law schools and five of Maryland's peer schools. The committee also conducted one-on-one interviews with almost every single faculty member, surveyed a host of current law school students, and talked with graduates and practicing attorneys to gauge opinions on Maryland's curriculum. "We needed a period of study on the state of the curriculum that reflected the faculty's, students' and graduates' shared vision of what legal education should be," she adds.
In-Depth Instruction in Legal Analysis and Writing

Out of this process, the committee prepared a report outlining the fundamental reforms they felt were needed to update the curriculum. They emphasized three critical areas.

“The first is that the vast majority of our peers have consolidated their first-year courses,” Steinzor explains. “By completing basic courses in one semester, you leave room for newer subjects that have become important for lawyers.” First-year students would be free to choose an elective such as a perspective course or a beginning sequence in a specific discipline such as business or administrative law.

“This gives students a jump-start on beginning to specialize as the law has become enormously complex,” Steinzor says. “This gives them the ability to focus on an area and also teaches them more fungible skills.”

Second, the committee agreed to retain the Cardin requirement in the curriculum. One of the major factors in Maryland’s reputation, the Cardin requirement mandates that a student must take an experiential course under the direct supervision of a faculty member before graduating.

“It’s a very expensive, intensive legal education,” Steinzor relates. “I tell the students in the Environmental Law Clinic, ‘You’re getting your money’s worth. It’s a safe place to learn where you can be coached by someone who is concerned about your learning.’”

Perhaps the most ambitious component of the report involves expanded instruction in legal analysis and writing. Dubbed LAWR for Legal Analysis, Writing and Research, the three-semester sequence of courses offers students an immersion into some of the most important components of legal education including analysis, legal reasoning, and the oral and written communication of complex, well-organized discussions.

“The first-semester course will be taught by full-time faculty members only,” Steinzor emphasizes. “Very few schools do that, but we want to have the best full-time faculty members reaching when students are most impressionable, to give them concentrated attention, to make them think like lawyers.”

The second-semester course, LAWR II, focuses on the anatomy of a case at the trial level. Students learn to work with facts, develop theories, and use research and writing skills to advance those theories. One credit of this course is devoted to research instruction taught by full-time library staff.

In LAWR III, taken in the first semester of the second year, students refine their skills in the appellate context. After researching and writing an entire appellate brief, students deliver an oral argument on the brief, perhaps in conjunction with the fall Moot Court Competition.

An Advanced Research Requirement

With their initial review and report completed, the committee began a series of meetings with faculty to discuss the proposed changes to the curriculum. Steinzor describes the meetings as very well-attended and a good institution-building process.

“We had the most vigorous debate on how to teach LAWR I, II and III,” Steinzor notes. The participation by the faculty was great. People were very engaged and very interested.” The final proposal allows faculty to teach LAWR I either as a small section broken out from a required course that he or she was already teaching or as a small section that can be coordinated with a large section of a required course taught by someone else.

“We’re going to try it and we think students will benefit a lot,” she says. “The committee has pledged to revisit these new programs and fine-tune them if needed.”

Other items in the final proposal, which was accepted by a faculty vote on Dec. 11, 2000, include expanding the criminal procedure course and changing it from a requirement to an elective and altering the upper-class writing requirement so that students must work intensively with a faculty member on a seminar paper. Work on peer-run journals will no longer satisfy this requirement.

“We’re also very excited about the advanced research requirement,” Steinzor says. The library staff will develop specialized research courses in specific areas such as business or environmental law to train students where and how to find information from the staggering number of resources available.

“This is an example of faculty going out of their way to ask for more work,” Steinzor says laughing. “Students must know how to find good, reliable information, not just print a three-foot stack of paper from the Internet.”

Committed to Improving Legal Education

With the first major faculty vote behind them, the committee is looking ahead to a review of elective courses in the upper-level curriculum. Although they’ve already put in countless hours of study and debate, Steinzor and the committee members remain upbeat and committed to improving Maryland’s legal education.

“We’re going to have a new building, a refined curriculum and we have a wonderful new dean,” she says. “There’s much to celebrate in the millennium.”