Technology is revolutionizing the practice of law. We take a look at some innovative law schools leading the way.
standing of legal technology,” he said. “The platform is shifting from one-to-one service to the Internet itself.”

As society becomes increasingly plugged in, it’s only natural that this tech-savvy population will expect to be able to resolve legal issues through the ease of their smartphones or laptops. “As the millennial generation starts to encounter legal problems, they are going to want to handle their problems online, as they are used to doing in other aspects of their lives,” he said.

In July, the University of Missouri—Kansas City School of Law hosted a Law Schools, Technology, and Access to Justice conference focusing on how the use of technology in the legal field could help clients who cannot afford an attorney and don’t qualify for legal aid, Granat said.

He said the conference will continue to virtually promote ideas about teaching law practice technology to students to increase access to law. “Follow-up projects are being explored through a website titled Law and Technology for Access to Justice and hosted through LegalHackathon.org,” Granat said.

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

Suffolk University Law School added a Legal Technology and Innovation Concentration in 2013. Run out of the Institute on Law Practice Technology & Innovation, which opened the same year, the program offers courses like automated document assembly, expert systems, legal project management, process improvement, and virtual lawyering.

Lauritsen teaches the courses Decision Making and Choice Management, which focuses on using technology to inform decision making, and Lawyering in an Age of Smart Machines, aimed at giving students a chance to write their own software.

“I think students need to understand what can be done with software and how software works,” Lauritsen said. “There is nothing better than hands-on experience.”

Regina Holloway said during her time in Lauritsen’s smart machines...
At some point, the paper-based legal office will fade away and those not up on technology will not be able to compete.

The classes are all taught online via Skype, video conferencing, and an online distance-learning platform with calendars, communication features, and other tools. “This forces students to use the technology while they learn about it,” Kimbro said. “The material encourages us to think outside the box,” said Annie Rodriguez, 34, who started at Florida Coastal in the spring of 2013. “The software allows for efficiency and maybe even a brand-new business model in which we deliver our services online,” she said.

Pioneers

While some schools are just adding legal technology to their curricula, the Illinois Institute of Technology Chicago-Kent College of Law has been ahead of the curve for years.

“The school first got involved in document assembly in 1978 using a mainframe computer and dial-up lines,” said Ronald Staudt, professor of law and director of the law school’s Center for Access to Justice & Technology (CAJT).

In 1984, the school created the Center for Law and Computers. “From the late ’80s through the ’90s, we taught all students how to use computers for case briefing, outlining their first-year courses, and for databases of authorities for research papers,” said Staudt. “The center developed electronic versions of popular first-year case books and supported an experimental first-year section, the ‘E section,’ in which all students had laptops with all their case books converted to electronic form.”

Then in 1999, the school started the CAJT, providing students with the opportunity to use the Internet and build web tools to help legal aid attorneys and pro bono volunteers reach more people. Projects also make it easier for people without a lawyer to better represent themselves.

One such endeavor is the Self-Help Web Center at the Circuit Court of Cook County in the Richard J. Daley Center, where law students teach unrepresented litigants to use the technology tools developed by those at CAJT.

Chicago-Kent College of Law also offers a large number of courses aimed at getting students up to speed on legal technology, including Internet law and computer law. “I have always been convinced that technology was a fertile area that could help to make what lawyers do more effective,” said Staudt, former vice president for technology development at LexisNexis Inc. “At some point, the paper-based legal office will fade away and those not up on technology will not be able to compete.”

This semester, Staudt joined with former students, Andrew Baker and David Bonebrake, and others, to teach a brand-new course on practice and professionalism. The class addresses how technology is affecting law firm operations and how students can prepare to ethically deliver services based on these changes.

Bonebrake, who serves as program counsel for the nonprofit Legal Services Corporation in Washington, D.C., said the legal aid component is a critical development. “Technology is having a significant impact on legal aid,” said Bonebrake, a 2007 graduate from Chicago-Kent College of Law. “Because of lack of funding, legal aid organizations are unable to provide services to everyone in...
By weaving technology into real-life scenarios, students get a much better understanding of how it can be used.

Hofstra University’s Maurice A. Deane School of Law takes a different type of approach to teaching legal technology. In 2009, it opened its Law, Logic & Technology Research Laboratory, which is headed by Professor Vern Walker.

“The lab is modeled after a science laboratory,” said Walker. “Our students try to systematically solve real-world problems and their education is the byproduct of the work they do.”

One of the biggest projects being tackled right now is the automation of argumentation mining of legal documents, Walker said. “We have software that can cull documents for ediscovery, but there is nothing available that can go through those documents and pull out the rules and legal reasoning behind the decisions,” he said.

Hofstra law school graduate Karina Vazirova used what she learned in the lab to secure a job as a legal knowledge engineer at Neota Logic Inc. “We provide a platform that allows building expert systems capable of automating business and legal decision making,” said Vazirova.

“I don’t know if I would have been exposed to the concept of legal technology as a regular law student,” she said. “Being a part of the program allowed me to go to conferences and meet people in the field.”

Students who work on projects not only learn how to use the tools, but also have the chance to work with Walker to publish articles, which he said gives them an entirely different layer of understanding.

“Students entering the field today are at the beginning of the technology learning curve so we not only have to give them the skills to hit the ground running, we have to teach them how to stay in the race,” said Walker. “The only way to do this is to ensure that they understand the principles behind the technology as opposed to just how to use it.”

SHERRY KARABIN (sherry.karabin@yahoo.com) is a freelance reporter and writer in New York City.