Students Conceptualize Legal Aid Apps in New Law School Class

A group of law students in Dallas have created legal apps to help the clients of civil legal-aid providers, as part of a new class at Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law in Dallas.

By Angela Morris | January 30, 2018

A group of law students in Dallas have created legal apps to help the clients of civil legal aid providers, as part of a new class at Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law in Dallas.

In addition to gaining experience using artificial intelligence software to create apps, the students tasted what it’s like to tackle social justice issues, all while increasing workplace efficiency for legal aid groups that help domestic violence victims, immigrants and pro se defendants in debt collection lawsuits.
“There's no other law schools in the state currently doing something like this,” said W. Keith Robinson, a Southern Methodist law professor who taught the new course about technology, innovation, law and designing legal apps. The unique aspect is that students are creating legal apps to help legal-aid providers serve their clients, he explained.

Robinson, co-director of the Tsai Center for Law, Science and Innovation, said he got the idea at a legal conference from a professor who teaches a similar class (https://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/legal-profession/legal-technologies/) at Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C.

The Tsai Center provided a grant that paid for licensing the app software, Neota Logic, for $750 for each of the eight students who enrolled in the inaugural class in the Fall semester. The class will repeat again in Fall 2018.

Neota Logic (https://www.neotalogic.com/platform/) users don't need to know computer code, because the software offers a drag-and-drop interface to create the apps. The apps can do things like automate a lawyer's client-intake procedures, create tools for clients to learn more about compliance with regulations, or automate the process to draft a contract or other legal document.

Students spent the first few weeks of the 15-week class learning how to use Neota Logic, which utilizes a drag-and-drop interface to create the apps. Then they divided up into three teams and began working with legal aid groups, which proposed the ideas for apps that would best serve their clients. Once students had the app idea, they studied that area of law, broke down the legal problem and organized a solution into steps that users would go through as they used the apps.

Because it was Robinson's first time teaching the class, he expected that students would face challenges learning the new technology. He was wrong.

“It was actually the complete opposite. The technology was very easy for them to grasp,” he said. “They were very savvy.”
The harder task was working with the legal aid lawyers, tackling a social justice issue, and figuring out how to make an app that low-income clients—some reading at a sixth-grade level—could understand and use.

“That was really the challenge,” Robinson said.

Mary Sommers, a third-year law student at Southern Methodist, said that the class ingrained a deep understanding of legal automation tools which she will likely encounter in her future legal practice. She also learned to focus on her audience, let go of her own mindset and solve a problem from a user’s perspective.

“I think all those skills—learning to be flexible and shed your skin and get in the perspective of someone else—all those have super straight applications to what we will encounter in our first year of practice,” Sommers said. “I also think the technology will have application. I see it as something that we will encounter. I’m glad I encountered it in this safe environment where I could play around.”

Sommers and her teammates, Mary Shivers and Jesus Valasquez, created an app for the Force for Immigrant Rights and Empowerment, a coalition of nonprofits and social justice groups that assist immigrants in North Texas. The students created a know-your-rights app that teaches about Texas’ failure to identify statute so that immigrants can learn about their rights during encounters with law enforcement.

Hannah Alexander, an equal justice works fellow and attorney with Dallas’s Equal Justice Center, who worked with the students on the know-your-rights app, said the app is clean and polished and organizes information in a usable way.

“If you get pulled over, you can quickly go to your phone and access information that you need to know so you are prepared for that encounter,” Alexander said. Immigrants can even use the app to report to the American Civil Liberties Union if they think they were racially profiled or subjected to an unlawful stop, she added.
Another team of two students, Christopher Cochran and Richard Sparr, created an app for a SMU Dedman legal clinic, the Judge Elmo B. Hunter Legal Center for Victims of Crimes Against Women, which represents victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking. The Texas Fresh Start Application helps survivors of gender-based crimes, who might have a conviction or legal incident on their own records, to understand whether they could get an expunction or order of nondisclosure.

Another team including students Courtney Luster, Joshua Paltrineri and Alexandria Rahn created an app for Texas Appleseed, an Austin-based public interest justice center with one ongoing project that aims to curb unfair debt collection practices. The students' app helps pro se defendants in debt collection lawsuits by drafting answers they can file in their cases.

Robinson noted that the students in the course will have a competitive advantage in getting a job because they can note their Neota Logic experience on their resumes. But the bigger, hidden value of the course is that the students dipped their toes in social justice issues.

“I hope when they go to these big law firms they don’t forget about the lessons they learned and they give back by doing pro bono or getting involved with these organizations,” said Robinson.

Angela Morris is a freelance journalist. Contact her on Twitter at @AMorrisReports