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## Dean's Column: Academic Success at Boyd

Jennifer Carr

*University of Nevada, Las Vegas -- William S. Boyd School of Law*

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**“The heart of our program is individualized sessions; nothing is more critical than timely, one-on-one guidance.”**

# Dean's Column

BY PROF. JENNIFER CARR, DIRECTOR, ACADEMIC SUCCESS PROGRAM, UNLV

## ACADEMIC SUCCESS AT BOYD

When did you decide to go to law school? Maybe you were from a working-class family watching an episode of “L.A. Law” when you realized the law was for you. Maybe you never knew a lawyer “in real life,” but still cherished the dream of becoming one.

If it isn't too traumatizing, take a look back at your first year of law school. If you didn't have an academic support program, you were likely plunged into the work and world of the law with little preparation. Perhaps you spent hours briefing your first case, only to get to class and find the brief useless. Maybe your first law school exam felt like it was written in Greek. The role of an academic support program is to serve as a life-preserver to the student drowning in the law school experience.

If your law school education began prior to 1995, it is unlikely you had an academic support program (ASP). Since 1995, academic support programs have flourished; by 2010, more than 160 of the roughly 200 ABA-accredited law schools nationwide had an ASP.

ASPs vary in type and style – some are mandatory for students identified as being at-risk, some are voluntary and open to any student in need of assistance. Others are open only to first-year students and some are open only to struggling students. At Boyd, we call our program the *Academic Success Program*, indicating this is a program aimed at achieving success for all students, rather than simply supporting students who might be struggling.

ASPs acclimate students to the academic rigors of law school and the demands of the legal profession. In Boyd's early years, some faculty members created an ASP-like experience for our students by giving seminars on various skills-based topics such as case briefing and outlining. Boyd's program formally began in 2003, with the hiring of Professor Pavel Wonsowicz, who laid the foundation for our program as it now exists. In 2006, Professor

Wonsowicz suggested I apply for a position as assistant director. I had never considered working in academia, but after serving as the assistant director for just a few weeks, I fell in love with the work. There's just something about seeing a student master a difficult concept that I find particularly rewarding. I often joke that I loved Boyd so much they couldn't kick me out!

Professor Wonsowicz moved on to direct the ASP at UCLA and Boyd hired me to direct its program. I've built on and expanded the program Professor Wonsowicz founded. Boyd's ASP now includes a greater emphasis on legal analysis and more support for February bar-takers as well as a greater use of trained peer-to-peer mentors.

The assistant director, DeShun Harris, and I continue to counsel students on subjects as varied as outlining, time management and exam-writing; we work with students to develop their legal analysis skills to improve both law school performance and bar pass rates. We reach out to students before they begin law school, during orientation, and maintain a presence throughout their law school careers up to, and including, preparation for the bar exam. We provide workshops that emphasize the skills necessary to pass the bar for both February and July takers.

The heart of our program, however, is individualized sessions; nothing is more critical than timely, one-on-one guidance. These sessions distinguish our program and make it remarkably effective. One student might struggle with synthesizing her case briefs into an outline. Another student might come to get help creating and managing a study schedule. The efficient management of time is an invaluable skill to a practicing attorney. Yet another student might be a non-native speaker seeking to improve her grammar and syntax within the legal writing realm. For all these students, we are teachers, coaches

and points of contact. The diversity of these situations forces me to be a jack-of-all-trades, but keeps my work lively and interesting.

The program gets results. Inevitably, some students find themselves on academic probation. However, after meeting with us, more than 90 percent of these students raised their grades and were restored to good academic standing. In 2003, before its ASP program began, Boyd's bar pass rate for first time takers was below the state average. In 2004, bar pass rates for first-time takers rose above the state average. We continue to maintain bar pass rates significantly higher than the prevailing Nevada pass rates.

Increased bar pass rates and student achievement are not the sum total of the program. I keep an old greeting card I received from a student whose entrance scores and troubled past indicated he would struggle with law school. He worked hard, putting in long hours of study and taking advantage of the ASP. Late one night, he slipped a card under my door said that read, "thanks for helping me achieve my dreams." I could say my job is about increasing diversity in the profession, helping graduates pass the bar or about elevating the analytical skills of our graduates. But at the end of the day, *that's* what my job is about – helping people achieve their dreams. ■

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**PROFESSOR JENNIFER CARR** has been the Director of the Academic Success Program at the William S. Boyd School of Law since 2009. She is admitted to practice in Nevada as well as the Federal District of Nevada. Prior to joining Boyd, Carr worked with Clark County Legal Services (now Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada). Carr received her law degree from the William S. Boyd School of Law. In 2006, she received the Barbara Buckley Community Service Award.

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