

# LAW WEEK COLORADO

## IAALS Program To Redefine Legal Education

By **Tony Flesor**  
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IN MAY, Educating Tomorrow's Lawyers at the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System launched its Foundations for Practice program, a years-long search for the qualities that new lawyers will need to succeed in law.

The project is focused on improving legal education by rectifying the differences between what law schools teach and what law professionals and employers say new lawyers need. Alli Gerkman, director of Educating Tomorrow's Lawyers, said the project is a way to build off of what she's heard from judges and lawyers in the community about lawyers' skills and to examine the issue on a national level.

Gerkman said the goal of the project is to give law schools more information about the types of skills, referred to as foundations, that lawyers need when they graduate so that they can set their programs up with those outcomes in mind.

She said there are some traditional skills that are important, such as legal writing and applying legal analysis, but there are also other skills and personality traits that are hard to measure, such as drive, grit and communication skills.

The program isn't just about helping new lawyers though. Ann Roan, training director for the Colorado Public Defender's Office, said the program also offers a way to help people who need lawyers.

"The value I see in the project is that we're trying to ensure that the profession all of us are so passionate about continues to be able to give that guiding hand of counsel to people who are in very desperate situations and need constructive advice and advocacy that only a well trained lawyer can provide," Roan said.

She said young lawyers who have trouble finding employment are often advised to get on court appointment lists for criminal defense and end up as legal representation for people who are already vulnerable and politically powerless.



ALLI GERKMAN

"To use them as somebody's experimentation lab to try to figure out how to practice law is an intolerable solution," she said. "A much better and more constructive solution for everybody involved is to just have a discussion and a fresh look inside law schools so that we don't have to have the potential for a result that doesn't make anybody happy."

The Foundations for Practice project officially launched in May with the convening of an advisory group made up of professionals working in big law, medium law, small law, solos, nonprofits, government and alternative legal counsel. Within the first year, the program is focused on identifying the skills professionals say are the most important skills for new lawyers.

The advisory group is made up of professionals such as Roan, Arizona Supreme Court Chief Justice Rebecca Berch, Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell president Hugh Gottschalk and Carolyn Elefant of the Law Offices of Carolyn Elefant and author of "Solo by Choice."

Gerkman said one of the primary focuses for the May convening was to examine what the

members of the advisory group said were valuable qualities in professionals. The committee looked at resumes in a hypothetical hiring situation. Some candidates had traditional qualifications such as an education from Harvard, experience as an editor for a law review and a high GPA, while others had more life experience or entrepreneurial skills.

Many committee members were interested in the traditional Harvard resume, but Gerkman said what surprised her was that many were interested in seeing the entrepreneurial candidate, though they believed the resume would never "make it through the door."

"That gives me a sense that we might be able to fix something there," Gerkman said.

The advisory group also helped review a survey to be distributed to lawyers and judges across the country to gauge what they believe are the foundations entry-level lawyers need to start their careers.

The survey results will be published in 2015 and will be followed with roundtables that will bring law schools into the

discussion.

Ultimately, the project will look at existing models as well as new models for how to help law schools refine their programs to meet the outcomes indicated by the surveyed professionals.

Roan said she hopes the project will deal with the disconnect between the academy and the practice in the legal profession. That disconnect wasn't a stumbling block when the employment model was built with the assumption that young lawyers would be apprenticed at law firms to learn the practical skills of practicing law, she said. Law firms have since stopped providing that type of apprenticeship after the economy reconfigured itself.

"We are in this really exciting time. There's a lot of energy around the need to change legal education, but more importantly, there seems to be a lot of interest coming from the profession," Gerkman said. "This is a project that we hope changes legal education, not just law schools but how the profession engages in this as well. We have the big lofty goals for this project and we think it will deliver." •

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