Santa Clara University School of Law has created an innovative way for students to expand their education and become better members of their community. A class called Leadership for Lawyers is offered for the first time this semester, and it may be the only course of its kind at an American law school.

Traditionally, leadership curriculum is found in business, engineering, and government policy schools, but School of Law lecturer Bob Cullen says that it’s important for law students to be introduced to leadership concepts and learn how to become effective leaders. “Lawyers are asked to be on non-profit boards and serve in community groups,” Cullen says. “They are often community advocates. We, as lawyers, are moved naturally toward positions of leadership, so our critical and creative thinking skills are very important. I am hoping to give my students skills that are not encouraged or cultivated in traditional law classes. I think it’s very important for lawyers to know how to do everything, to have as many different types of skills as possible.”

A LEADERSHIP CLASS FOR LAWYERS
In the fall of 2005, Cullen proposed a leadership class to School of Law Dean Donald Polden. At the time, Cullen was teaching a negotiation class. “There is a lot of crossover between leadership and negotiation,” Cullen says. “You need to have good problem-solving skills and be able to think critically. But in negotiation, you’re competitive, while leadership is collaborative.”

Polden thought that a leadership class was a perfect fit for the law school. “Lawyers are abundant in leadership positions,” he says. “In political bodies, community support groups, and many other places. We were interested in developing our curriculum to look at how lawyers use leadership skills. We need to take a look at what law schools offer and what they should offer in this vein. Lawyers have an obligation to serve others, and we’re very interested in learning about the skills lawyers use and need to fulfill their ethical duties and responsibilities. By encouraging leadership, we’re making the law profession stronger.” Leadership training, Polden adds, is in line with SCU’s mission to train lawyers of “competence, conscience, and compassion.”

Polden says that Hurricane Katrina was also an impetus for offering a leadership class. The disaster, he explains, prompted the law education community to question how well students would be prepared to assist their communities if a crisis occurred. “When there is a crisis and lack of direction, people often look to lawyers and judges for direction,” Polden says. “They have the education, the potential, and the skill sets to be great leaders, but they need to have the willingness to exercise those leadership skills.”

Cullen, who is a mediator and lawyer at Cullen Group, a real estate and development negotiation firm, specializes in negotiation and mediation strategy and has been interested in leadership issues for about 15 years. He is the founding president of the San Jose Leadership Council (www.sjleadership.org), a non-profit organization that provides training programs to encourage leadership and community involvement.
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THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE
Cullen worked with Barry Posner, dean of the SCU School of Business, in developing the Leadership for Lawyers class. Posner’s well-known book, The Leadership Challenge, is the primary text the class will use. Posner has been studying leadership since 1983 when he and Jim Kouzes began their “personal best” research project, in which they surveyed thousands of people to pinpoint specific skills that were used in leadership positions. The survey included questions such as, “How did you foster cooperation and collaboration among those whose support you needed?” and “How did you build a sense of enthusiasm and excitement for this project?” Despite differences in people’s individual stories, Kouzes and Posner found similar patterns of behavior that they used to create a leadership model, called the “Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership,” which provides the basis for the students’ leadership development training. It illustrates specific things that people did to successfully lead others, such as inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, and setting an example for others to follow.

“The leadership training and development is based on the Leadership Challenge,” Cullen says. “We’ll use case studies and guest speakers to illustrate the ways the principles apply specifically to law.”

For example, to study Posner’s “Modeling the Way” principle, the class will look at Gandhi’s work as a lawyer and how he created change. For the “Challenging the Process” principle, the class will learn about Thurgood Marshall’s use of the court system to challenge the status quo.

Cullen also worked with Kirk Hanson, executive director of SCU’s Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, to gain insight into the ethical issues that surround leadership.

“Lawyers and leaders are both faced with difficult decisions,” Cullen says. “They both deal with standard ethical dilemmas.”

Polden stresses that the links between the law, ethics, and leadership are important. “Education can sometimes be restrictive if we only teach what the law says,” explains Polden. “But we educate our students to know the difference between what is right and what is legal. It takes tremendous leadership for lawyers to represent poor, marginalized, or unpopular clients, to able to stand up and say, ‘What I’m doing is right.’”

TEACHING TEAMWORK
By collaborating with various people to develop the leadership class, Cullen says, he has “created something unique that has benefited from the wide variety of educational expertise here at SCU. It is a great example of the creative energy that can occur when our schools at SCU work together.”

Teamwork is also very important for the 25 students who are currently enrolled in Leadership for Lawyers. Each week, one class member will present a summary of that week’s reading and lead the others in a discussion of the main themes. The students also submit their notes to be posted on the class’s Web site (www.leadership4lawyers.com/class).
“Lawyers need to work more collaboratively than they do,” Cullen says. “To move down the road from being just critical thinkers to creative problem-solvers who create positive change.”

Barry Posner says that the integrative aspect of a leadership class is one of its most important attributes. “In law school, like medical school, the focus is on learning the skills to get the job done,” he says. “But in the end, it’s all about working with other people to make things happen. Many leaders are ordinary people. Ordinary people can do extraordinary things.”

Niti Gupta, a third-year law student, thinks leadership training is a natural, and necessary, extension of her other classes. “In law, you’re working for the community,” she says. “You’re an advocate for one person or many people, and this class helps you to see the potential for that.”

Another benefit of the class, Gupta says, is that it’s different from her other courses. “The course is very refreshing,” she says. “We’re looking at the breadth of law and its real-world applications. Law intersects every facet of society, and lawyers often become leaders. In law school, generally, we learn how to become cogs in the machine. This class is integrative.”

THE PATH AHEAD
Although the course is still new, Cullen hopes that it will be an important part of law curriculum in the future. “SCU School of Law is leading the way in this area of education for its students,” Cullen says. “It is very much consistent with the mission of the law school, which is to direct our students to a higher purpose, to provide them with an ethical prospective of contributing to the legal system in which they will work and in the communities in which they live. We need to redefine the lawyer as being more than just an advocate for their client, but also an advocate for their larger community.”

Posner agrees that leadership training should continue, and expand, not only in law schools but in many different types of programs. “If you understand the impact that law and lawyers have on our society, it seems almost criminal that we don’t offer leadership training as part of a legal education,” he says. “Leadership isn’t the responsibility of some hero or famous person; it’s everyone’s responsibility. Offering this first class opens the possibility for more to follow. We’re very excited about that.”

Dean Polden says he hopes to use the course as a platform to develop several things. “We want to recognize leadership in our students,” he says. “And to build on the body of knowledge that already exists, to really look at leadership skills that lawyers possess and apply in their careers.” Polden says he wants to develop more curricular and co-curricular programs that focus on leaders and leadership training. “There is a rich vein of information available about leadership,” he says. “But not much that is specific to law. We are building and expanding on what’s already out there so that we can prepare our students for the ethical and moral responsibilities they will take on in their professions and lives.”

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