

legal.online
May 2010
Copyright 2010 Robert J. Ambrogi

An Advanced Degree in Solo Practice

By Robert J. Ambrogi

If there is anything on which lawyers agree, it is that law schools fall short in one critical regard. They teach the *process* of law, but not the *practice* of law. This is a particular handicap for the solo lawyer, who has to be not only lawyer, but also chief cook and bottle washer, all without a colleague or mentor to turn to for advice.

Enter **Solo Practice University**, <http://solopracticeuniversity.com>. This Web site offers a collection of courses about practical topics related to substantive law, marketing, management, technology and work/life balance. It also helps fill the mentor gap by facilitating opportunities to network with other like-minded lawyers.

Founded in March 2009, SPU just marked its first year of operation. It is the creation of Susan Cartier Liebel, a Connecticut lawyer, and David Carson, a law school graduate and Web designer who is SPU's technical director. They recently gave me a temporary guest password so I could tour the grounds of this virtual campus.

Overall, I was impressed. SPU offers a varied selection of practical courses taught by an accomplished faculty of lawyers and experts. It is thoughtfully designed and takes full advantage of Web 2.0 tools. Its subscription plans are reasonably priced and allow unlimited access to all courses and features.

The Courses

SPU courses mirror real-world courses in that they consist of multiple lectures supplemented by written materials and outside assignments. Most of the lectures are in video format. Most videos feature the instructor, speaking from his or her office. Production quality varies from webcam to professional, but all videos are clear and audible. Some lectures are only in audio. Most run roughly 30 minutes.

Course topics vary but all are geared towards the practical. I counted 48 courses plus an assortment of one-shot guest lectures. More courses are in the works. Substantive law courses cover such topics as the basics of a real estate transaction, essentials of family law, personal injury 101, and the art of the deposition.

Courses in the areas of marketing and management span fee-setting, time management, marketing, collaboration, business strategy, client relations, and ethics and professionalism. Technology courses discuss virtual law practice, trial technology and real-world legal research. Work/life balance courses address freelance lawyering, working from home, and career planning.

Classes are ongoing, with all lectures and materials archived. That lets students start a class at any time and take it to fit their own schedules. Some classes are taught "live" in real time, but even those are recorded and archived. Each course has a brief introductory video that describes what it will cover.

The Campus

Some real-world campuses stand out for their design and architecture. The same can be said of SPU. The site is thoughtfully laid out. It is engineered to make good use of Web 2.0 elements to enhance the learning process.

The look and feel of SPU is closer to that of a social-networking site than of a more traditional CLE site. In fact, the first action a new registrant is urged to take is to set up a profile and upload a photo, just as one would on a networking site.

It takes just a few moments to find one's way around this virtual campus, thanks in part to a "find" tab at the top of every page that directs you to listings of courses, group, faculty, members and forums.

Each course gets its own page or "classroom." It provides information about the course and the instructor, contains the archive of all lectures and materials to date and links to recent discussions regarding the course. Each course has its own RSS feed. Each also has its own "study group" with a discussion forum and list of enrolled students.

"Registration" for a course is optional. The main advantage it offers is e-mail notification of course updates.

The Faculty

The faculty is composed largely of practicing attorneys. Many are themselves solos, some widely known through their writing and speaking elsewhere. Others are consultants in marketing, management, career counseling and the like.

To list names is to risk offending those I leave off. Just a sampling of the nationally known instructors on the roster are Jay Foonberg, author of the popular ABA book, *How to Start and Build a Law Practice*; Carolyn Elefant, author of *Solo By Choice: How to Be the Lawyer You Always Wanted to Be*; Richard Granat, a pioneer in e-lawyering; and Ed Poll, a leading legal-management consultant.

All faculty members maintain "office hours," when they are available to speak with students. They are also available through the study group forums. Some are also available for live chat.

The Student Body

SPU is designed like a social network. That means that students and faculty can connect with each other directly and through common-interest groups. Users can create their own groups or join existing one. SPU has groups organized around geographic locations, practice areas and other common interest.

SPU allows students to create any number of blogs at no extra charge. These can be private to the SPU community or public for anyone to read. If you are new to blogging, SPU has a course on how to blog.

The Tuition

The cost of attending SPU is \$97 a month or \$225 a quarter or \$595 a year. Law students pay the same monthly rate but a reduced quarterly rate of \$175 and annual rate of \$495.

Whatever rate plan one chooses, the tuition provides the same level of unlimited access to all SPU courses and features. For subscribers who choose quarterly or annual billing, SPU promises to lock in the current rates for as long as they continue their enrollments.

Other Features

Like a bricks-and-mortar university, SPU has a student co-op. Here, it features products and services from outside vendors. Most of the vendors offer discounts or special deals for SPU members.

SPU also offers members the ability to purchase professional liability insurance at discounted rates.

Weaknesses

Some lawyers will be disappointed to find that SPU does not offer CLE credit for its courses. Founder Leibel told me that adding CLE certification would be "cost-prohibitive" and would defeat SPU's mission of providing a reasonably priced resource for solos.

However, as of this writing, SPU had just entered into a reciprocal-membership agreement with the online CLE provider Lawline.com. Under the agreement, new, full-year subscribers to SPU will also receive a full year of unlimited CLE at Lawline.

Another weakness is that practice-area courses are, by necessity, generic. They do not get into the nuances of any particular state's laws. For the most part, this is OK, given that the courses focus on practical skills rather than on substantive knowledge.

SPU's courses cover many basic substantive areas of practice but not all. Current areas include family, bankruptcy, business, intellectual property, real estate, special education, nonprofits, personal injury, products liability, trusts and estates, and entertainment. If your interests lay elsewhere – employment law, for example – there is no course for you.

That could change at any time. SPU is adding faculty and courses monthly, Leibel says, with new practice areas already in the works.

SPU does not offer free trials. If it sounds intriguing, try it for a month at \$97. That gives you an all-you-can-eat buffet of existing courses. Rather than leave you satiated, that might whet your appetite for more.

Robert J. Ambrogi is a lawyer, writer and media consultant and author of the blog [Robert Ambrogi's LawSites](#).