



# students for startups<sup>3</sup>

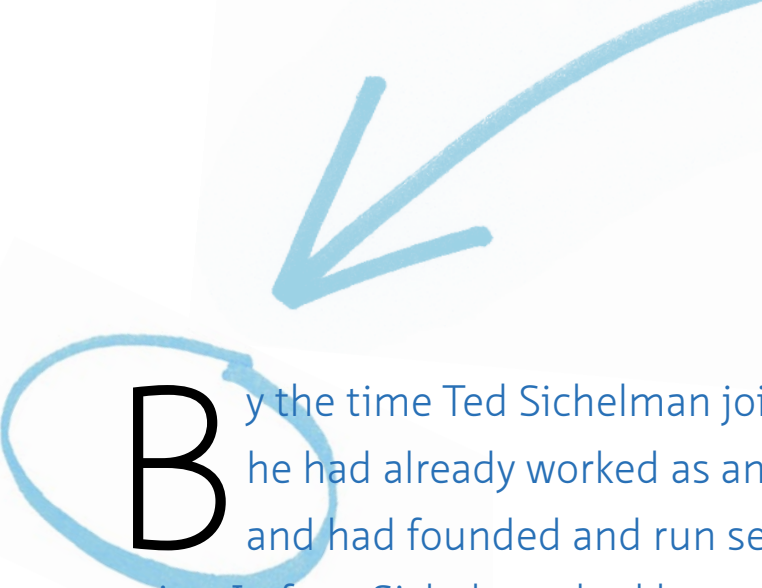
An innovative program matches new tech companies needing legal advice with law students needing experience

by Karen Gross



MARSHALL WILLIAMS

*Associate Professor of Law Ted Sichelman runs USD School of Law's new Technology Entrepreneurship Law Clinic (TEC).*



**B**y the time Ted Sichelman joined USD's law faculty in 2009, he had already worked as an intellectual property (IP) lawyer and had founded and run several successful startup companies. In fact, Sichelman had been an entrepreneur since high school and was determined to combine this entrepreneurial spirit with his high-tech business know-how, and fold it into the law school's curriculum. Sichelman, an associate professor, wanted to offer students a more hands-on, practical approach to IP and corporate law involving startups. After trading ideas with lawyers and businesspeople in the community, and looking at what other law schools in the country were doing, Sichelman and former law school Dean Kevin Cole came up with a brilliant plan.

Cole approached San Diego's CONNECT—widely regarded as the world's most successful program linking technology-focused entrepreneurs with mentors and resources—and pitched a different kind of startup: one that would partner local startup businesses with the law school and its students.

"I was already familiar with CONNECT," recalls Sichelman, "because one of the companies I founded was a CONNECT startup. We decided to go to them for the clinic because they have a huge set of startup companies that could benefit from pro bono legal work."

The idea for the clinic involved pairing law students with young companies that would likely require a lot of legal research and advice, but didn't have the means to pay for it. The partnership quickly became a three-way arrangement between the law school, CONNECT's

flagship Springboard program, and several San Diego law firms, which are also CONNECT sponsors. It's known as the Technology Entrepreneurship Law Clinic, or TEC, and is now in its second year. Last year, 12 students participated in the course, and this year, 11 will be involved—culled from a group of about 50 applicants each year.

"We treat it just like getting a summer associate or an associate position," says Sichelman, who runs the classroom component of the course and supervises the students throughout the semester. Résumés and applications are forwarded to the law firms; firms then interview and select students. Participants are overseen directly by either partners or associates, and all of the work they do is pro bono, which means the startups pay nothing for the legal services they receive from



*USD School of Law alumnus Matthew Bresnahan, '07, is an associate specializing in patent law at the San Diego office of Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati.*

says interns like Kwon are playing a key role in the service the firm provides. Wilson Sonsini works with a huge roster of startups and also happens to have been involved with a company called Google, back when it really was little.

"I'll give the students as much as they can take on," Bresnahan says. "There's always going to be an attorney there reviewing it at the end, but we're so busy here. I'd love for the students to be able to run a client meeting and ask the right questions."

Third-year student Hanna Kang was given ample opportunity at the firm Knobbe Martens Olson & Bear, where she says her contact with three clients over two

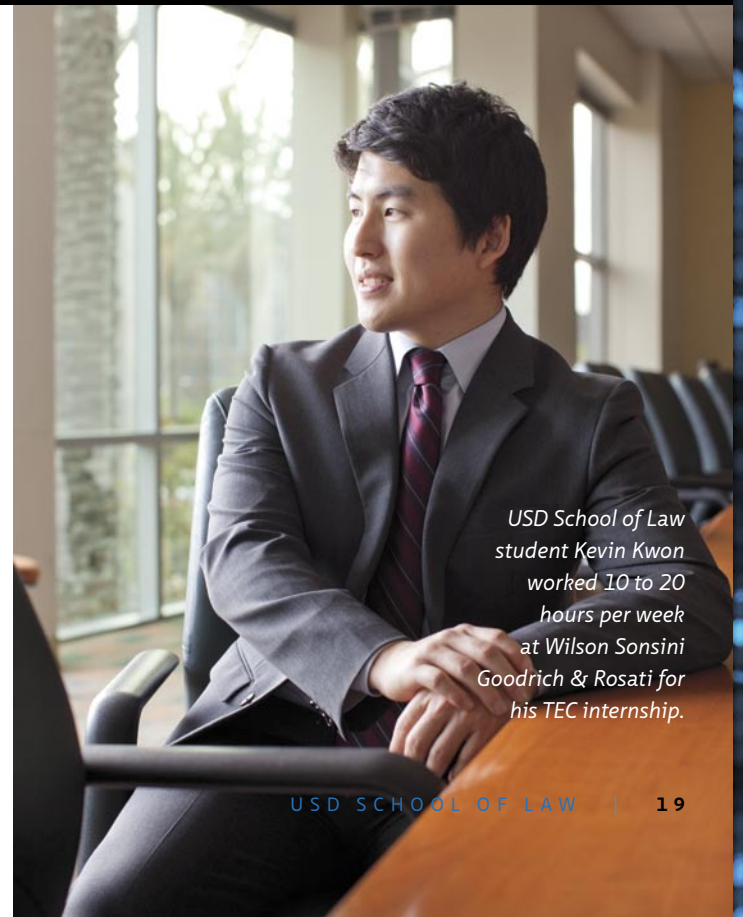
*"It was very appealing," says Kevin Kwon. "The opportunity to work for a firm in San Diego while getting credit for it was ideal."*

the students as well as the supervisory time from the lawyers. The students get full academic credit for their work.

"It was very appealing," says Kevin Kwon, a third-year law student who won a spot at the San Diego office of Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, and was mentored by Matthew Bresnahan, '07, an associate specializing in patent law. "The opportunity to work for a firm in San Diego while getting credit for it was ideal."

Kwon, who worked 10 to 20 hours per week, says he spent his time helping to prepare patent charts prior to litigation, researching patent infringement and learning how to formulate arguments in intellectual property cases.

And Bresnahan, who spent countless unpaid hours supervising not just Kwon but other students as well,



*USD School of Law student Kevin Kwon worked 10 to 20 hours per week at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati for his TEC internship.*



*Top: Associate Professor of Law Ted Sichelman with special guest lecturer Neil Senturia in the TEC classroom. Students Brian Headman and Stuart Sherman are pictured below.*

semesters taught her a lot about customer service and putting legal theory into practice. The clinic also provided her contacts that have already proven invaluable.

“We would have a lot of interaction with the clients,” Kang remembers. “It was almost as if they were my clients, with the supervision of the partner, of course. So, I definitely enjoyed that part.” Kang also believes the experience helped her land two more internships—one with the pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and the other with a district court judge in San Diego.

So far, the TEC partnership has generated enthusiasm among all of its participants. While it’s still early to gauge its long-term impact, the initial reviews are very positive.

“It’s a win-win-win for Springboard and particularly for the startup companies,” says Ruprecht Von Buttlar, director of CONNECT’s Springboard program. “They need to think about how to protect their technologies and their scientific disclosures. This gives them

inexpensive but effective ways to do that.”

Marc Zimmerman, founder and CEO of the Language Express Inc., grabbed the opportunity when Von Buttlar offered it. Springboard connected his startup with two law firms, both of which actively vied for his business. Zimmerman ended up signing with Bresnahan at Wilson Sonsini and describes the experience as seamless.

“Working with the student was just like working with a regular attorney,” says Zimmerman, who adds that the USD law student listened well, researched his ideas and made sure that he wasn’t infringing on anybody else’s intellectual property. While the student’s work was pro bono, Zimmerman’s company also struck a deferral agreement with the law firm, which means that the Language Express will be able to focus on developing its business and won’t have to be concerned with paying any legal fees until it secures outside funding.

So, what’s in it for powerhouse firms like Wilson Sonsini, Knobbe Martens, and others whose lawyers are mentoring and supervising USD students pro bono, and in some cases offering discounted or deferral deals to Springboard’s fledgling startups? That’s obvious, according to Springboard’s Von Buttlar.

“The law firms eventually get a client,” he says. “This is pure and simple business development that they get in a very inexpensive way.”

And if things work out, says Wilson Sonsini’s Bresnahan, law firms like his solidify a potentially long-term, lucrative relationship with a successful new business.

“The ideal situation for the firm is for these clients to become mature companies, and we can service them in any way they need.”

Leonard Svensson, a partner with Birch, Stewart, Kolasch and Birch LLP, adds that there are other



*Matthew Bresnahan, '07, with Marc Zimmerman, founder and CEO of Language Express Inc., and third-year law student Kevin Kwon.*

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benefits that don't necessarily contribute anything to the firm's bottom line.

“Part of it is just giving back, helping the community as a whole,” he says. “It's also a recruitment tool. If you have an intern that's really good, maybe you've found somebody that you'd like to hire when he or she has finished law school.”

At the law school, the TEC program has already attracted far more applicants than it can handle, and Ted Sichelman knows why.

“It's extremely valuable,” he says, “because law firms today want students who actually know what

they're doing, and teaching from casebooks only is just not sufficient to give them that training.”

Like any other startup, the partnership's principals are working hard to ensure their model yields promising results and to bring their backers a solid return on their investment. So far, seven law firms remain with the program, and Sichelman, with his impressive success rate, is aiming for an expansion down the road.

“At the end of the day, you need to do something where students get real-world experience,” says Sichelman. “That's what we're giving them here.” [a](#)