As the oldest independent law school in North America and the university from which President William McKinley earned his law degree, Albany Law School is an institution steeped in history. But it isn’t stuck in the past. Keenly aware of changes in the job market and in the local business community, the educators at Albany Law make a point to constantly evaluate the curriculum and adapt it to the evolving needs of the students and the legal marketplace.

One critical trend that Albany Law is keeping an eye on is how, increasingly, employers are looking for much more than just book-smart graduates with a wealth of legal knowledge crammed into their heads.

“[Employers] expect our students to have practical experience and competence in oral and written communication, legal research, problem solving, negotiation, and other skills essential to effective practice,” says Alicia Ouellette, associate dean for academic affairs and intellectual life. “To meet these demands, we offer students the opportunity to practice under faculty supervision in our law clinics, more than 150 field placements, and a newly formed semester-in-practice program. We are also working to integrate practicums, problem-based courses, and capstone courses throughout our curriculum. These opportunities allow our students to apply their classroom lessons to the real world and to develop the legal skills necessary for success in the legal marketplace.”

In just the past five to 10 years, Albany Law has transitioned away from heavy reliance on the Socratic Method (learning via questions and answers) and toward more hands-on approaches involving simulated and actual legal work. This shift is the result of continuing evaluations of student, faculty, and employer feedback and student performance.

While curriculum changes such as this are gradual and develop over many months or even years, other changes happen quickly. For example, this year the Albany Law faculty identified a need for students to develop expertise on the Affordable Care Act.

“One of our faculty members responded by putting together a course proposal, which was reviewed by the curriculum committee, approved by the faculty, and made available to students,” Ouellette says. “The same process resulted in a new course on law and emerging technologies that will be offered for the first time this spring in collaboration with the College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering.”

As the only law school within 90 miles of New York’s capital city, Albany Law caters its curriculum somewhat to the government sector, helping prepare law students for possible local careers. Students have access to the highest state court, federal courts, the executive branch, and the state legislature, with more than 1,000 alumni attorneys working in state government.

But, of course, government isn’t the only industry for which the Capital Region is known. Albany Law students also have unique access to local technology companies, financial companies, non-profits, and more.

“Many of our graduates are finding their jobs outside of traditional law firms,” Ouellette says. “We are responding by building a curriculum that teaches students transferrable skills and competencies that will allow them to be effective legal professionals no matter the context.”