Karen Lapinski, JD ’05, will never forget the feeling of disorientation in one of her first law classes. The professor described the course’s writing assignments as similar to those in undergraduate school. Lapinski, then age 38, had completed her bachelor’s degree in 1986 and her master’s degree in 1989, both in industrial engineering, at the University of Illinois at Champaign–Urbana. Lab reports and the professional writing from a decade-plus career as a senior engineer specializing in manufacturing quality were not the type of writing expected of a law student.

Chris Faerber, JD ’05, relates to Lapinski’s experience. He entered the School of Law at age 30, after having completed his bachelor’s degree in psychology and political science in 1995 at the University of Chicago. He worked for a short time in finance in Seattle, then became involved in the microbrew industry. Faerber soon found himself making beer at a number of microbreweries across the country, including the Schlafly Tap Room in St. Louis. This occupation had little call for the computer skills so familiar to many other first-year students.

In 2003 Lapinski and Faerber, who were in the same first-year section, co-founded Second Career Law Students (SCaLeS), along with fellow classmates Tammy Vanheyningen, Christine Heinsz, and Megan Smith. Dedicated to addressing the special challenges and common interests of nontraditional students, this student organization has 22 members and a mailing list of approximately 20 more. Members’ ages range from the mid-20s to mid-50s. Their career backgrounds are just as diverse, including classical music, interior design, higher education, Internet software, microbiology, and digital mapping.

“Most of our members have been out of school for quite awhile,” says Lapinski. “These people don’t fit the standard mold of entering law school right after undergraduate school or after having worked a couple of years. They have had careers, and are likely to be in committed relationships or have family responsibilities.”

The initial objectives of SCaLeS were focused on three areas: 1) transitioning back into school, 2) job hunting, and 3) providing social events for students with families or other committed relationships.

Last year the group sponsored a potluck dinner and a wine tasting. It also worked with the Career Services Office to set up meetings with alumni, who themselves had been second-career law students. The alumni described their experiences in law school and offered tips on job hunting. Additionally, SCaLeS is working with Student Services to create health plans, such as prescription drug coverage, that better address the needs of nontraditional students.

“We’re gradually expanding our goals and purposes,” says Faerber. “And we’re open to anyone. You might be married or in a serious relationship. You might not be interested in going to a smoke-filled bar. A lot of us have been there, done that.”

Nontraditional students enhance the classroom experience, according to Dorsey D. Ellis, Jr., the William R. Orthwein Distinguished Professor of Law. “They haven’t just gone to school all of their lives,” he says. “Their experiences illuminate class discussions. They also may well have an advantage once they get their law degree. They’ll bring the same maturity and self-discipline that helped them as law students to an employer’s workplace.”

Nontraditional Students Start a Support Organization

by Brenda Murphy-Niederkorn