

This piece will be featured in Counselor, the Drake University Law School Alumni Magazine, and on their website, [www.law.drake.edu/newsEvents/lawSchoolNews.html](http://www.law.drake.edu/newsEvents/lawSchoolNews.html)

(copyright 2003 by Drake University)

## **Technology Takes Toil Out of Test Taking**

By Tony Bohnenkamp

The computer age may make test taking easier for law students, but there's simply no getting around learning to spell correctly. Gone are the days of No. 2 pencils, blue books and cramped hands thanks to a computer software program called ExamSoft. The software is changing the way college students take exams, and Drake Law School students and faculty are benefiting from it.

It all began when California lawyer Adam Wasserman took the Bar Exam and was frustrated with the lack of technology in the exam's administration. In an effort to improve all areas of the exam process, he released ExamSoft in 1997.

Within ExamSoft, there are four programs addressing all areas of examinations, both for students and faculty. SofTeach allows professors to create questions and build and administer exams. SofTest enables students to download, take and then upload completed exams. SoftScore then allows professors to download and score exams, analyze the results, and prepare reports based on these results. And FlexSite allows professors to administer exams securely from anywhere in the world.

Drake has been using ExamSoft for two years. Approximately 50 percent of students use SofTest for exams. "Taking the exam with the program is pretty much the same as a regular blue-book exam," says first-year student Kurt Van Thomme of Ankeny, Iowa. "Except, instead of everyone using blue books, about half the class has their laptop out. The professors hand out the exam on paper and people either use their blue books or computers to answer the questions."

Van Thomme feels there are many advantages to using SofTest---the most obvious being the efficiency of typing answers rather than writing them out. "It's nice to be able to go back and edit your answers without your exam looking like a scribbled mess," he says. "And, there's no danger of your professor not being able to read your handwriting."

So, how does it work? ExamSoft sets up a different Web site for each university's students from which they download the software program via username and password. After the program is installed on a computer, it performs a check of the hardware and software to make sure the program is compatible. The student then takes a qualification exam that shows the user how exams will be presented, and also verifies that the program is working correctly. Upon completion, the user registers with ExamSoft. SofTest doesn't allow the user to take exams until they have completed the qualification exam and registered with the program.

Assistant Dean Bill Hennan sees the implementation of the ExamSoft program as part of Drake's continued commitment to stay ahead of the game. "The use of computer technology, in this case a student's laptop, is simply a recognition that this generation of students has grown up with computers as every day tools," he says. "In the past, entering a classroom without paper and pen would, of course, be unthinkable. Today, we are getting to the point where most students regard laptops as much a necessity as paper and pen."

Hennan cites two particular parts of the program as being extremely valuable. He says the ExamSoft student-module has an automatic back-up feature that makes an encrypted copy of a student's exam answers on their computer's hard drive. It also logs information about any problems a student might have during the exam so that exam administrators can determine what actually went on during an exam if there is a problem.

"I am happy to report we have not lost any exam answers while using ExamSoft," says Hennan. "And, although we're not using this aspect of the program yet, ExamSoft even has the ability to grade the multiple choice portion of an exam, which would show the student the correct answer immediately after he or she answered it."

Drake Law School Systems Administrator Shawn Madsen, the one-person tech support staff for ExamSoft, also likes many of the elements of the program. "One of the key features of SofTest is the way it locks people from accessing other applications on their laptop during an exam," he says. "Without this feature, students could open notes or even surf the Web to find answers to exam questions."

Madsen says SofTest reboots the user's computer bringing them into a restricted shell at the start of each exam session. At the end of the session, SofTest reboots again taking the user to their normal Windows interface. He also says that there are some components to the program that the law school has yet to implement, but is planning to expand the use of the program in the near future.

"My objective for the Fall 2003 semester is to start delivering exams over our wireless network," says Madsen. "Not only will this save time in exam distribution, but also in collection. Wireless exam delivery will allow us to print exams and bring them to the instructors almost immediately after the exam has concluded."

And the law faculty have responded as favorably to ExamSoft as the students says Hennan. "Professors really like to be able to read typed exam answers," he says.

But not everything has changed from the days of writing in blue books.

"We have found that ExamSoft is not a secret weapon," says Hennan. "If a student does not know the answer, then a typed or handwritten response makes no difference in the final exam grade. We don't even allow use of the built-in spell-check in ExamSoft. So students using ExamSoft are on equal ground regarding spelling."