

MoFo Recruits Patent Talent Through Harvard Partnership

By Tracey Read

Law360 (September 29, 2022, 3:35 PM EDT) -- Morrison Foerster LLP has found a unique way to build relationships with the life sciences sector while recruiting new talent.

For the fourth year, the firm is offering its patent law course in collaboration with the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences' Harvard Biotech Club, a student organization with more than 3,700 global members.

This fall's six-week program launched Wednesday. It's taught by MoFo attorneys and includes lectures, interactive workshops and a career fair introducing intellectual property law with an emphasis on life sciences patent issues, patent licensing for technology developments and company formation. Attendees include students, postdoctoral researchers and industry members.

"It's been a great sort of branding," Michael R. Ward, head of MoFo's life sciences and patent practice groups and IP group co-chair, told Law360 Thursday. "I mean, there's few better brands than aligning with Harvard. That's been great for us."

Ward, who leads the course program along with MoFo partner Anita Choi, said the class came to be after he moved to Boston from San Francisco.

"We opened the Boston office in February 2019," Ward said. "I had complained for so long that we didn't have an office there. When we finally pulled the trigger, my wife and I moved to Boston. When we opened, I got introduced to the then-president of the Harvard Biotech Club, and they were looking for a law firm who could teach a course for them in the fall. So we worked with them and put it together."

Ward said he wanted a Boston presence because of its vibrant life sciences community, due to the constant stream of scientists, postdocs and graduate students getting spun out. In addition, the Biotech Club is not limited to Harvard students, but is open to anyone who's interested in life sciences, such as students from MIT and Boston University.

Initially, the class was taught in person at the firm. Although 100 people signed up, back then the Boston office had room for only 55 students.

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MICHAEL WARD
Morrison Foerster

Then in 2020, COVID-19 hit, and the class — which moved online — grew to about 250 students.

"We had people signed up from all over the world for the class in fall of 2020," he said. "That's when I realized, OK, this is bigger than I thought it was. It's not just Boston. We're touching people all over the place, which was really fun."

This year, the class is down to a more manageable size, 150 students.

On Wednesday, Ward taught IP 101, and then MoFo San Francisco partner Matthew Chivvis talked about a case that the firm handled for the University of California at Davis. "A professor stole some strawberry genetics and all the drama associated with that, which really resonated with a lot of students and postdocs," Ward said.

Students also get networking opportunities through the class.

"We take questions during the class through chat," he said. "If you're interested in a career in IP, we'll connect you with somebody who's transitioned to become a patent agent. If you work for a company, and you have questions about company formation or licensing technology or how do I patent this stuff, we'll give you 30 minutes of free time kind of thing. And it's been remarkable how successful it's been for us."

Meanwhile, the firm's Boston office has grown from one IP attorney — Ward — to 17 patent staff members, many of whom came through the Biotech Club, either by taking the patent course themselves or through word of mouth from past attendees.

Thomas Keane, who graduated from Harvard University in 2021 with a doctorate in chemistry, is now a patent agent at MoFo. He took the firm's course in fall 2020 after finding out about it through the school's chemistry department.

"This career is a great opportunity to use your scientific knowledge and get involved in legal sorts of stuff and work with products being protected by IPs and taken to market," Keane said. "One of the really helpful things about this course is really just helping to make sure people are aware that this is an option in the first place. I found out patent agents as a job existed even just because a couple people in the Ph.D. lab I worked in went into this sort of field. A lot of people go to grad school and are very set into going into academia or going into industry, but there's not really a lot of publicity about this option."

Ward said he's been surprised by how popular the class has become beyond the Boston area. For instance, in his breakout session Wednesday, he had a client all the way from Singapore join in — despite the fact that it was before 5 a.m. her time.

"I'm traditionally based in San Francisco, and we used to recruit talent from the Boston area to come to San Francisco, and maybe 10 years ago that pipeline just sort of dried up," he said. "We just could not convince anyone to move from Boston to San Francisco due to the cost of living and other reasons. And since we've been here, it's completely flipped. It's like, 'Oh, you have an office in Boston? MoFo's at the top of my list' kind of thing. So it's really been fantastic. It's just a great recruiting spot for us."

--Editing by Karin Roberts.