There’s a popular saying among entrepreneurs, especially in the tech field: It’s better to ask for forgiveness than permission. Lawyers, though? Lawyers prefer permission.

“Lawyers are good at saying no,” says Steve Tapia, an intellectual property lawyer for more than 30 years. “But for entrepreneurs, no isn’t an acceptable answer. For lawyers to help entrepreneurs, they need to learn how to think like entrepreneurs. They need to figure out how they can say yes.”

Tapia, who has worked for companies like Microsoft and DirecTV, is now a distinguished practitioner in residence at Seattle University School of Law, where he’s helping to build programs that prepare students for legal careers assisting entrepreneurs at every level of the economy — from smartphone apps to mom-and-pop businesses to multinational corporations.

Those efforts have now grown into the law school’s first LL.M. program. This fall, Seattle University School of Law (Seattle U) will offer a master of law degree in technology and innovation — the first of its kind in the region — as well as an advanced degree in tribal law. A third LL.M. program in elder law will be added in 2017.

The new technology curriculum is based on conversations that the LL.M. program faculty and law school Dean Annette Clark had with employers and other lawyers about what skills and knowledge they wanted to see in the law school’s graduates.

“The ongoing dialogue we had with the legal community suggested that there was a real need for practitioners who understand privacy and security,” Tapia said. “These are increasingly important issues for everyone in business, from the smallest retailer to giant companies.”

The 24-credit LL.M. degrees are open to people who already have J.D. degrees, as well as qualified graduates of foreign law schools. Each degree can be completed in one year of full-time study or two years on a part-time schedule. Evening classes are offered to accommodate working students, building on the law school’s long-standing evening J.D. program.

Area experts and practitioners helped develop the curriculum and will serve as guest lecturers, instructors, and mentors to students in the programs. Tapia said the curriculum is specifically designed to help students pass professional certification tests after graduation.

**Technology law**

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and the various actors whose interests, perspectives, and goals affect the technology law landscape.

Beyond this core curriculum of study, students may choose to concentrate on either data privacy and cybersecurity or digital commerce and financial technology.

Ravi Kiran is a member of the LL.M. program’s inaugural class. He currently practices as a technology and corporate lawyer in Hyderabad, India, but hopes to relocate to the U.S. “There is an unprecedented demand for lawyers with specific expertise in technological and information security laws,” he says. “Having handled issues emanating from cyber-crimes and financial fraud, I was keen to equip myself with the intricacies of technological advancements, the adverse effects, and regulatory mandates.”

Many lawyers already work in the technology field with a J.D. degree. But Alejandro Villegas liked taking the bar exam. “I really did. I enjoyed it,” he says. “I liked figuring out which legal issues were relevant to the question, because it’s never just one. It’s all intertwined. And the time pressure just adds an extra challenge.”

Perhaps it’s his background as an engineer that gives him his natural affinity for solving complicated problems. As a graduate in Seattle University School of Law’s class of 2016, Villegas spent the last four years attending school part-time, figuring out how a legal education could augment his 10-year career as a security, privacy, and compliance engineer (formerly at Microsoft, now at Amazon).

As it turned out, he found a perfect niche. Intrigued by the overlap of legal questions and engineering challenges in his work, Villegas pursued an independent study with intellectual property scholar Professor Margaret Chon. The result was a research paper about the attorney’s role in cybersecurity and compliance, and it’s been so well-received that he’s traveled both nationally and internationally to speak on the topic at conferences.

“My J.D. is a good foundation. The legal analysis and writing skills I’ve learned have been so important, especially when communicating with a VP,” he says. As he travels to discuss his research at conferences, he realizes the need for more attorneys with cross-disciplinary skills. “Attorneys not only have an opportunity to provide cybersecurity compliance advice, but also a responsibility to participate in all aspects of compliance from an end-to-end perspective,” Villegas wrote in his paper.

Similar to patent attorneys having educational backgrounds in science and technology, security lawyers would be well-served by knowing how engineering works. “Sometimes attorneys will sign contracts with security addenda that aren’t even possible,” he says. “The technology just doesn’t exist.”

Villegas was inspired to keep going with his legal education and will be one of Seattle U’s first students in its new LL.M. degree program in innovation and technology. “This is a perfect opportunity to really focus on one particular area of the law,” he says.
the LL.M. program provides a depth that can’t be found by just learning on the job. “Rather than picking up conventional wisdom and lore, these students will be grounded in all the relevant statutes and regulations — really, the underpinnings of the technology sector,” Tapia says.

As the tech industry moves from adolescence to adulthood, it’s time — some might say past time — for lawyers to be more involved. Privacy and security regulations have long been in place for restaurants, hotels, and taxi services. The sharing economy, made possible by entrepreneurs who know code but not necessarily the law, is now grappling with some of the problems that made those regulations necessary.

“When you’re collecting customers’ information, when you’re taking their money, you have certain responsibilities,” Tapia says.

Meeting a need

The goals and dreams of incoming students show exactly how a degree like this can be useful. One is an engineer who plans to patent his own invention. Another is a human resources manager interested in business and employment law. And another is a paralegal for a tribe who would like to become a leader in a tribally chartered corporation.

And for the law school, it’s a chance to meet a need in the community in a way that takes advantage of existing strengths. Seattle University School of Law has the largest Indian and tribal law program in the United States, so the LL.M. and MLS degrees in that field were a natural extension.

The program provides lawyers with both academic and practical training in the areas of tribal law, federal Indian law, traditional forms of governance, and policy within the federal, state, and tribal structures through a rigorous program of study.

The LL.M. in elder law, planned for 2017, will emphasize building skills and knowledge in the areas of access to health care coverage, income maintenance and retirement planning, financing the high cost of long-term care, protection from abuse and neglect, consumer protection, guardianship, age/disability discrimination, housing, and estate and incapacity planning.

“Legal education is what we do best, so it just made sense to offer more of it,” said Dean Clark. “Our faculty are amazing teachers and scholars, and we have a great deal to offer students who want to go even deeper in their legal studies.”

Find out more about Seattle University School of Law’s new programs at www.law.seattleu.edu/gradlaw or email gradlaw@seattleu.edu.