By Elliott Ash

In their first meeting of the Fall 2008 semester, the Student Senate Computers and Library Committee discussed the pros and cons of the law school’s test-taking software, SofTest, and agreed to prepare a full report on the subject for the senate and student body.

Second- and third-year law students are already familiar with SofTest. The application, developed and maintained by Examsoft Worldwide (www.examsoft.com), reboots the student’s computer into a safe exam-taking mode that disables access to the internet and to other programs. After the exam, SofTest uploads the student’s answer to Examsoft’s Web server. Sooner or later, the instructor logs onto the company’s Web site and grades the exams.

SofTest serves two purposes: 1) prevent cheating, whether through online research services or communication with outside parties; and 2) ensure anonymity of the test-taker for grading. Most will tell you that it fulfills these purposes pretty well. Every semester there are a few technical glitches, but they are usually limited to a small minority of students and can usually be amended.

At the same time, SofTest suffers from significant technical limitations. Macs cannot operate SofTest without major technical workarounds, and Linux machines are wholly incompatible.

Meanwhile, a majority of the current 1L class are running Macintosh laptops.

Less seriously, SofTest requires Windows XP or higher and a screen resolution of 1024x768 or higher. The software is incompatible with custom keyboard layouts.

Students who have had no technical difficulties with SofTest might not recognize that there are also monetary costs associated with proprietary exam software. The law school has to pay Examsoft a per-student fee to use the software, but the terms and pricing in the contract are subject to a non-disclosure agreement.

For the aforementioned reasons, the faculty, administration, and IT department agreed three years ago to abandon SofTest and move to an honor-code system. The technological and logistical problems were overcome, but the Student Senate voted to block the switch.

Apart from familiarity, the key concern for the voting senators was the possibility of cheating. Because law school exams have a tremendous influence on short-term employment opportunities, the fairness of the system is of utmost importance. The importance of grades in the employment process correspondingly incentivizes students to cheat, and an honor-code system makes cheating easier to accomplish.

On the other hand, the honor-code system would retain proctored examinations, which prevent cheating the old-fashioned way. And take-home examinations, which already comprise a substantial proportion of law-school evaluations, already operate under a de facto honor code system.

If adoption of the honor code system still makes enough students uncomfortable with abandoning exam software, there are free, open-source, and platform-independent alternatives such as TCEXam (tceexam.com).

These concerns and others were raised during the Committee’s first meeting. The full report will address them in full, and will be publicly to the CLS student body. A preliminary debate on the issue will be held at an upcoming Student Senate meeting.

Discussions about the future of examination procedure come at a time of flux in law-school evaluations generally. Some schools have had success with honor-code evaluation procedures, while others have made the leap from letter-grade to pass-fail paradigms. At Columbia, at least, these issues remain unresolved.
Your 2008-2009 Newsletter Committee

Can you match the names and faces?

Senator Board
Rex Chatterjee, Chairman
Elliott Ash
Aditi Chatterjee
Patryk Labuda
Erik Lindemann
Scott McJannet
Dan Y. Shin
Eric Wolkoff

Contributors
Claire O'Sullivan

To become a contributor, send an e-mail to:
clsblackletter@yahoo.com

Spotlight on: Matt Rafalow

By Eric Wolkoff

Q: How long have you been at CLS? Do you live in the neighborhood?
A: I've been at CLS since fall of 2006. I live in walking distance, right by the Lion's Head Tavern on Amsterdam.

Q: What brought you to Columbia?
A: I had just graduated from college in Virginia and wanted to work in higher education. I really liked how Columbia's Morningside campus is a lot cozier than other colleges in the City.

Q: What do students generally come to speak with you about?
A: Mostly students come to talk about student organizations and events. Though, quite honestly, I do help a lot of students find the really good candy we keep in the office.

Q: What has been your favorite job, aside from your current one?
A: I interned for a gay rights organization in Richmond, Virginia soon after Lawrence v. Texas was decided -- quite an interesting place to be during that time!

Q: What is your favorite restaurant in Morningside Heights?
A: I'm a huge fan of (authentic) Asian food, but unfortunately there's not much of a selection up here. I know it's a little fast food-ish, but Roti Roll makes some really delicious food. A great late night snack!

Q: Name something most people don't know about you?
A: No, I'm not a student here! But I am a grad student at Columbia's School of Education. I'm studying the sociology of education with regard to gender/sexuality issues in adolescence.

Q: What's one thing every CLS student should do before they graduate?
A: Take advantage of the Arts Initiative's discounted movie tickets for Columbia students. $6.50 for a movie ticket in New York
Free Anti-Stress Neck and Back Rubs!

By Patryk Labuda

Feeling a bit stressed out? Too much reading for class? Too many extra-curricular activities? How to prepare for all these exams? If any of the above describes you, then maybe what you need is a good neck and back rub.

Student Health Services are offering free mini back rubs to all Columbia students as part of Wind Down Wednesday. All you have to do is swing by Wien Hall to receive a massage from a specially-trained student Stressbuster. The popularity of this program in previous years proves that several minutes of relaxation can make a difference in your week. Be sure to check it out!

Time: Wednesdays, 4-5 pm.
Location: Wien Hall, First Floor Lounge.

Map credit: www.columbia.edu

CLS Black Letter Crossword

ACROSS
3 Two candy bars in one wrapper
4 Noodle variety
6 hell's _________
9 Litigator's tome of guidance.
11 Federer's backup plan
12 "That was easy!"
13 Famous for its football or market regulation?
14 Director of forthcoming movie "W."
18 Just married Ryan Reynolds
21 Band's music featured in "Mamma Mia!"
23 Just off the terror list
24 Tasmanian city, also an upstate college
26 "boots with the fur" brand
27 GM is merging with who!!
29 CLS's spooky party pad
30 Can see Russia from her house
31 "shorty want a thug, bottles in the club" lyricist

DOWN
1 Building where the free back rubs are
2 Showed OU who's boss
5 Law School building
7 Sardinia's sister
8 Movie about first black Heisman winner
10 Famous cupcakes
15 Just across from San Diego
16 Boxer Floyd, Jr.
17 3:10 to
19 Fancy way of saying "to stop"
20 Wachovia's white knight, almost
22 Splatter-painter
25 Racing for the cure
28 Coldplay song

Puzzle made at www.puzzle-maker.com
Senate Business Roundup

By Daniel Y. Shin

The Student Senate has been very busy since the last issue of The CLS Blackletter, holding three general body meetings in four weeks. The full minutes for those meetings are posted at http://www.columbia.edu/cu/law/senate/meetings.html. Our next meeting will take place on Monday, October 20, at 9:15 pm in JGH 107. The agenda has not been announced yet.

At our first regular meeting of the year, held on Monday, September 15, 2008, the Senate welcomed the newly-elected 1L and LLM senators, and three main orders of business were addressed. First, a resolution was passed honoring Meredith Uhl ’10 and Craig Greiwe ’09 for their work on organizing the “B(law)ck Party” — the student organization fair held on September 5, 2008, and attended by over 800 people. Second, the 2008-2009 Student Senate Budget Committee was elected by unanimous consent. These individuals are: Benjamin Brickner ’10, Stephen Cockrell ’09, Dustin Crawford ’09, Max Dubin ’10, Dimia Fogam ’10, Brian Goldberg ’09, Gillian Horton ’11, Christina Kim ’11, Jason Lear ’09, Peter Lochore LLM, Oscar Loui ’11, Adam Sparks ’09, Meredith Uhl ’10, and Kahlil Williams ’11.

Third, this year’s budget guidelines were passed. The main changes from last year’s guidelines are: student organization capital expenses are to be considered as special allocations with separate procedures from regular expenses; a 14-day reporting requirement and a three-year record-keeping requirement for student organizations; and penalties for failing to timely file. Finally, an item of new business was raised by the University Senator, who noted that some students at the undergraduate colleges were working to bring a Naval Reserve Office Training Corps (NROTC) program to the University—ROTC programs had been expelled from campus in 1969 during the Vietnam War—and there was a brief discussion about what the CLS student body’s position should be; an ad hoc committee was formed to discuss what the Student Senate’s next steps would be, and the idea of planning a town hall forum was raised.

Two weeks later, on Monday, September 29, 2008, a special meeting was held to recognize new student organizations and student organizations that had amended their constitutions, and to consider and approve the 2008-2009 budget and the Fall Semester student organization allocations. Student organizations are all entitled to a minimum of $300 per semester in funding from the Student Activity Fee. The first item of business was the appointment of Charles Wolf ’11 as chair of the Student Senate Housing Committee and Rex Chatterjee ’11 as chair of the Student Senate Newsletter Committee. The Senate next decided to implement a weekly “office hours” program on Wednesdays from 3:00 to 5:00 pm in the lobby of JGH; students can meet with their senators directly to discuss issues of concern.

Groups with constitutional revisions that were recognized included: African Law Students Association, California Society; Columbia Latin American Business Law Association; DeVinimus; Entertainment, Arts, and Sports Law Society; Harlem Tutorial Project; High School Law Institute; Law Revue; Outlaws; Society of Law, Science, and Technology; and Tenants’ Rights Project. BLSA was recognized conditional upon its agreement to amend its constitution this year with respect to its non-discrimination policy. Eleven new groups were recognized, as well: Beltway Bound; Building a Better Legal Profession; Columbia Gastronomy Society; Columbia International Arbitration Association; Columbia Law School Military Association; InSITE; Intravives Social Club; Law Students for Social Enterprise; Universities Allied for Essential Medicines; and Yoga Club. The Columbia Law School Whiskey Society had applied for recognition but had subsequently withdrawn its application.

The academic year overall budget of $349,750 was approved, and can be found at http://www.columbia.edu/cu/law/senate/docs/fy09budget.pdf. Highlights include $155,730 for allocation to student organizations, $54,000 for Graduation Ball, and $30,000 for Barristers’ Ball. Next, the student organization allocations for the Fall Semester were considered; several amendments were made, and the allocations (downloadable from http://www.columbia.edu/cu/law/senate/docs/f08fundingfinal.xls) were approved by unanimous consent. Finally, the University Senator noted that there was a new source of event funding from the University for events that are cosponsored across different schools at Columbia and that involve alumni, and there was a call for volunteers to help organize this year’s Senate-sponsored blood drives.

The most recent meeting took place this past Monday, October 6, 2008. The main item on the agenda was a visit from Dean of Student Services Michelle Greenberg-Kobrin. Dean Greenberg-Kobrin addressed a number of important issues. The minutes from the meeting have not been approved and posted as of yet, but will be made available on our website as soon as they are, and the highlights of the meeting will be reported in the next issue of The CLS Black Letter.