## Women's law school experiences explored during Edith House Lecture

hicago-Kent's Felice J. Batlan, a specialist in feminist legal theory, delivered "Are We Our Mother's Law Students?: Women's Law School Experiences and an Agenda for Action" as Georgia Law's 27th Edith House Lecturer.

While acknowledging that great strides have been made as far as the sheer number of women enrolled in law schools across the nation, Batlan argued that there is room for improvement.

"The fact that women now make up 50 percent of all law students is really remarkable," Batlan said. "But my question here today is not one about numbers so much as it is about the quality of women's law school experiences."

Her story began in the spring of 2007, when students in her Gender and the Law class at the Chicago-Kent College of Law read portions of Lani Guinier's *Becoming Gentlemen: Women, Law School, and Institutional Change.* 

Guinier wrote that although men and women entered law school with practically identical academic qualifications, men received better grades in law school, participated more in class and received more faculty attention. Additionally, the women in his study described significant "psychological problems" stemming from law school and how they were treated by both faculty and other law students.

"The book generated very strong reactions from my students. In part, I had thought that they may not actually relate to the experiences of these women from 1994. This was a new age, a new dawn. But of the 22 women in my class, about three-quarters of them deeply related to the sense of alienation experienced by the women in Guinier's study," Batlan said.

However, according to Batlan, about 30 percent of her class disagreed. They countered that what the women law students expressed was really part of all law students' experiences, both men and women.

This mixed reaction inspired Batlan and four of her students to conduct their own survey to see what other Chicago-Kent law students had to say about their experiences in law school and examine if there were any differences based on gender.

Some of the areas addressed in the study were class participation, interactions with professors outside of class and student confidence/self-perception.

Half of the student body responded to the online survey, Batlan said, and the results "were shocking."

For class participation, 24 percent of men reported they volunteered in class on a daily basis versus 16 percent of women.

"Women were more likely to report that they were silent in class due to timidity or fear, while men were more likely to report that they didn't participate because they were unprepared or had a lack of interest," Batlan said.

The survey also found that while men and women interacted with professors outside of the classroom on an equal basis, they reported very different feelings when doing so.

Batlan said a lot of women admitted feeling intimidated when approaching their professors and were concerned about "wasting the professor's time." However, men reported feeling entitled to go speak to the professors and did not have

the same concern of disruption.

When asked how they felt about their intelligence since entering law school, slightly more than 30 percent of women versus 17 percent of men said they felt less intelligent than they did prior to attending law school. Also, women were more likely to indicate that they were less

pleased than expected with their overall law school experience.

Last year, Batlan and her students presented the full results of their study to student groups, faculty and administration, and devised reforms to help improve women's experiences at Chicago-Kent.

She said by the fall of 2008, several initiatives were put into place such as creating a first-year orientation program on diversity.

Other recommendations that have not been implemented include hiring more women so that every first-year law student has at least one female professor.

An assistant professor at Chicago-Kent, Batlan previously worked for a law firm in New York and served as a judicial clerk to Judge Constance Baker Motley of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York.

She earned her undergraduate degree summa cum laude from Smith College and graduated magna cum laude from Harvard Law School, where she served as executive editor of the Harvard Women's Law Journal. Batlan later returned to school at NYU and earned her doctorate in history, specializing in U.S. legal and gender history.

The Edith House Lecture Series is hosted annually by the Women Law Students Association in honor of one of the first female graduates of the University of Georgia School of Law.

House was co-valedictorian of the law class of 1925, the first class to graduate women.