

A Conversation with

SUSAN STEINGASS

Former judge and State Bar president takes the reins as director of the Law School's new Communication and Advocacy Program.

Susan R. Steingass, formerly a Dane County circuit judge and president of the State Bar of Wisconsin, has been named director of the University of Wisconsin Law School's new Communication and Advocacy Program. The new program is the UW Law School's response to an in-depth survey of recent graduates and their employers, in which the strong opinion of both groups was that oral and written communication skills join legal reasoning as the most important skills to be learned by today's law students. Steingass, a shareholder in the firm of Habush Habush & Rottier, will continue to be of counsel with the firm.

As classes began this fall, Professor Steingass found time to answer questions about the new program and talk about why she is excited to be directing it.

What prompted your interest in this position at this time in your career?

Many things came together: I've always taught here; I love teaching; and I've always kept in contact with the Law School. I wanted to get back to teaching and wanted to contribute as I could to the exciting new advocacy communications program at the Law School. As a judge and a lawyer, as well as a teacher of law students for quite a

number of years, I've seen both sides of legal education: the law school learning experience and the challenges that new lawyers face in their careers after law school. I knew that I wanted to help move the program in the direction of being a learning-by-doing and a reality-based program—based on the work that lawyers really do.

Did you know instantly when you saw the position description that this was a challenge you wanted to take on?

When the position was posted, I was particularly interested in the integrated approach to communication: oral and written—pulling together all the parts.

What did you do to prepare for the task of reinventing the program?

First of all I read a lot—about legal writing and communication



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programs around the country. I talked to people in the Legal Research and Writing program, because there's a lot of experience and wisdom in that program. Aviva Kaiser, my predecessor, has an important continuing role as an instructor of advanced legal writing. Mary Barnard Ray has been working here for twenty years—she knows the national scene, what works. I talked with law faculty and members of the profession. And I reviewed our survey of alumni and

employers, Assessment 2000, which identifies written and oral communication as the most important skills a lawyer needs.

Would you like to put into words for readers what your vision is for this program—what it is going to accomplish?

“To build on what we have and to move forward to help students learn what they need to know.”

The Assessment 2000 survey told us that the three areas that are the most important are the ability to do legal reasoning and the ability to communicate the results of that legal reasoning in writing and orally.

We’re trying to give students the tools to successfully articulate in writing and orally the results of their legal reasoning—and we’re doing that—by doing it!

If you have excellent teachers and an excellent curriculum and individual help, as we do here, you ought to be able to produce excellent communicators.

How is the program unfolding: What changes are already in place?

There are four major areas of change:

First, we had in mind more reality-based writing assignments—more like those that students will face in their clerkships and their careers. We have designed a completely new curriculum to reflect this core value.

For example, all 279 first-year students had a first assignment that was meant to set the tone. We sent them in teams of four to State Street to identify and report on skateboarding and street obstruction ordinances on State Street. They had to understand the rules, then analyze what they saw in light

of those rules—a critical analytical skill.

We asked them to be silent observers, as if they were law clerks asked to do a report. We did encourage them not to make any citizens’ arrests!

The statutes are ambiguously written, and this was to make the important point that law in a void doesn’t mean much—a lot of interpretation is needed.

All our assignments were redesigned, under the leadership of Laura Dunek, to be reality-based.

Second, we also wanted to integrate the program with substantive courses. We have put in place several changes designed to advance this integration, and we hope to expand efforts over the next several years.

Taking advantage of the fact that all Legal Research and Writing sections have no more than fifteen students, and each entering student is assigned to one of his or her substantive courses in small groups of no more than twenty, we have paired six of the twenty-one Legal Research and Writing sections with substantive-course small groups.

In those pairings, we are trying to pass the message that the analytic process without the ability to communicate that analysis orally and in writing does not complete the circle: Each is part of a necessary whole. We hope to have more pairing for the next class, with more interaction between substance and communication.

Third, we worked hard on teacher training before the semester began. We also turned to one of our very best teachers, Virginia Hayes, to work with writing teachers on how to teach skills and concepts.

Susan Steingass received her undergraduate degree from Denison University in 1963, her M.A. in English literature from Northwestern University with honors in 1965, and her J.D. degree magna cum laude from the UW Law School in 1976. After graduation from Law School, she served as law clerk to Nathan S. Heffernan, chief justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court.

Steingass was an associate and then a partner at Stafford, Rosenbaum, Rieser & Hansen in Madison from 1977 to 1985. She was a Dane County circuit judge from 1985 to 1993, and was elected Wisconsin Trial Judge of the Year in 1993 by the Wisconsin chapter of the American Board of Trial Advocates.

In 1994, she joined Habush Habush & Rottier, where she has focused her practice on personal injury and commercial litigation, and is now a shareholder. She remains of counsel with the firm.

Steingass was the 1998–1999 president of the State Bar of Wisconsin. She has been named one of the Best Lawyers in America, and is a recipient of the Marygold Melli Achievement Award, given by the Legal Association for Women. In 2003 she was named chair of the Wisconsin Sentencing Commission, and continues to receive numerous honors and appointments.



Fourth, we wanted to recruit some more lawyers from the community—lawyers who are good writers and good teachers. We now have six new teachers as a result.

These are changes already in place.

What other changes can we look forward to?

This year we are re-thinking the entire course. No new idea is out of bounds.

That doesn't mean that we are going to throw the baby out with the bath water. We are looking at what's good in the program—at what our students need and how we give it to them.

This winter we invited a group of faculty members, alumni, students, practitioners, and Law School administrators to brainstorm about how best to teach writing. Our course redesign will come from these ideas, refined and developed by the Legal Research and Writing faculty.

We're looking to move the program forward.

Despite the fact that you may be known more in the legal community for your work as a judge, attorney, State Bar president, etc., you have years of experience in the teaching profession, don't you?

Yes, I've done a lot of teaching. Before I went to law school, I was a college English teacher. I've taught

here at the Law School: Evidence, Civ Pro I and II, Environmental Law, Negotiation, Trial Advocacy probably ten times. I also do a lot of national and international teaching. I've been on the board of the National Institute for Trial Advocacy for years. And I've done a lot of continuing education with the State Bar.

What have you learned from these teaching experiences that you brought to the project of creating the new program?

What I've learned over the years is that teaching adults is a collaborative process: Adult learning comes from the interaction between students and teacher. With courses like Civil Procedure you give a lot of information, but when they really learn it is when they engage with the ideas. For me, engaged learning comes from interaction.

One thing that people may not know about this job is that I was hired not only to direct the program, but also to teach. I taught Civil Procedure in Fall semester, and I'm teaching Evidence and Oral Communication Spring semester. Teaching across subject areas is one way of integrating the Communication and Advocacy Program into the substantive life of the Law School.

What are the major challenges for you as you begin this work?

Change is very difficult for people—

for all of us—whether it's a positive change or a negative change. People also get committed to doing things a certain way. Then there's the budget—budget is always a challenge here. We are working with very limited means in these times.

But on the other hand, I've found people ready and willing to change. It's difficult, but not insurmountable.

Did anything surprise you when you began this position?

I had worked all summer with a team from the Legal Research and Writing department designing the curriculum and syllabus—I was pretty grounded in this program. I was glad to see the commitment of the people in this program—and they certainly have it.

I was also glad to see the entire Law School faculty's commitment to improving and expanding the communication and advocacy training and programs.

Are there any other facets of your new job that you would like to share with readers?

I want to stress the amount of support I've received from the Law School—from Dean Davis right on down. People have been not just welcoming, but encouraging. I have confidence we're going to do good things together.