

Preeminent and Public

A National Law School with Wisconsin at Its Heart



These past few months as I traveled across the country and around the state meeting and talking with many of you, I heard a number of recurring messages about the Law School. One stood out. It came from alumni in all areas of the country, in every type of practice, and at all stages of professional life. “Don’t underestimate the importance to us of our school’s national stature and reputation,” you told me.

Along with the importance of teaching students the skills to be successful practicing lawyers and

providing an excellent education at a reasonable cost, you emphasized the significance to you and your classmates of having graduated from one of the very best public law schools in the country — a highly-ranked school with a commitment

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to excellence. It was an important message at an important time, and your comments resonated with me.

For most of our history, the University of Wisconsin Law School has occupied a very special position within legal education. We are the only public law school in a state that has historically been strong economically; we are part of one of the world’s leading research universities; and we are one of only two or three law schools in the nation that helped shape the kind of interdisciplinary approach to legal scholarship that now represents the mainstream at law schools everywhere. As such, the Law School is fortunate to be the beneficiary of a rich legacy, a long-standing national reputation, and a first-tier listing in the national rankings. In an atmosphere of competition for national recognition, for

top students, and for sought-after faculty, we can’t rest on our laurels or take anything for granted.

Nor can we forget that one of the things that differentiates us from other law schools is that we have Wisconsin at our heart. As our state’s only publicly-supported law school, we have a special place in the state’s educational system and a special responsibility to the citizens of Wisconsin. We have always produced a very high share of our state’s leaders in law and in fields outside law, most notably business and government, and we will continue to educate the professionals who will take leadership roles in Wisconsin.

Our faculty are deeply committed to preserving what has made the UW Law School special, and they are thinking innovatively about its future direction. They are involved in finding ways to use their knowledge and expertise to gain national recognition for the Law School and to connect with the state of Wisconsin in a way that I hope will literally redefine what it means to be a law school that is both public and preeminent.

I’ve written before in this column about the increasingly competitive nature of law schools and the importance of reputation and rankings. The principal determinants of a law school’s reputation and its rankings in today’s marketplace — and the things that matter when

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competing for the best faculty and students — are well known. They are: (1) the collective opinion about faculty scholarship and reputation (as judged by other law faculties) combined with a school's reputation among lawyers and judges, particularly those in major population centers; (2) success in recruiting the most academically qualified students (both residents and nonresidents); and (3) placement success.

In the effort to enhance a school's national stature and reputation, other factors, although not measured by those who rank law schools, also are influential, such as a well-designed curriculum, including a solid business curriculum; a diverse and dynamic student body; and superb teachers who successfully prepare students for the rigors of practice and give them the confidence to successfully compete on a national playing field if they so choose. In addition, one cannot underestimate the power of a school's alumni — both their continuing

involvement and support and their ability to secure positions with the most prominent firms, the top businesses, and the most interesting nonprofit organizations. These are things that have a direct impact on a school's national reputation and ultimately on its success in recruiting the best teachers and students ... and the circle continues.

What options do we have to more effectively enhance our national stature? Our alumni are in prominent positions and our new graduates are increasingly successful in competing for the most sought-after jobs across the country. A significant number of graduates work internationally and in major cities across the country, with a substantial concentration outside of Wisconsin in cities like Chicago, Washington, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Minneapolis, and, as this issue of the *Gargoyle* describes, New York — markets where those who influence our reputation live and work. Connecting with alumni is critical.

We can also make a difference through a renewed emphasis on recruiting, with a combination of innovative programs and an increased emphasis on merit scholarships that will enable us to recruit the best students — both by keeping top resident students in the state for law school and by enticing highly qualified nonresidents to Wisconsin. And, we can support our faculty in

their efforts to increase the amount they publish and the importance and visibility of their scholarship so that our academic reputation, one of the largest influences in the national rankings, elevates us as we deserve.

As we move forward to redefine what it means to be both preeminent and public, I look forward to increasing alumni involvement and working with you to enhance the national prestige of a Wisconsin law

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degree. Your message to me about what you expect from your alma mater is an important one, and I share your enthusiasm for meeting the challenges of the future and enhancing the stature and reputation of this remarkable institution. I believe that we belong at the top and that our school can be as great as you and I want it to be.

— Dean Kenneth B. Davis, Jr.