

Recent Controversy Provides Impetus for Teaching Forum

University of Wisconsin Law School students and faculty members participated in a forum on the evening of March 20, 2007, to address the topic “Shared Rights and Responsibilities in an Academic Community: Talking to Each Other about Controversial or Sensitive Material in the Classroom.” The faculty-initiated forum acknowledged the importance in a law school curriculum of engaged and challenging dialogue about controversial subjects, and offered teaching strategies to support and encourage student participation.

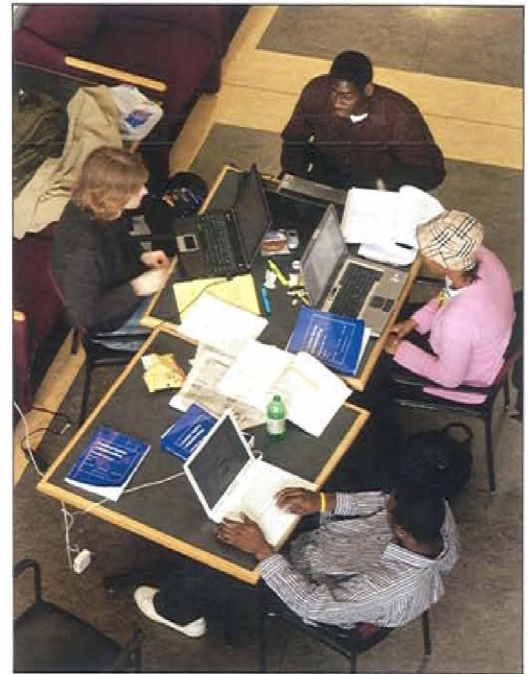
The forum was in response to a mid-February Legal Process class in which sensitive material was presented. Professor Leonard Kaplan was discussing how government, including legal institutions, fails adequately to respond to poverty and the challenges of a multicultural society. To bring the discussion closer to home, he referred to the experiences of the Hmong people in Wisconsin. To some students in the class, Professor Kaplan’s statements included racial stereotypes and generalizations about the Hmong in Wisconsin that were negative and untrue.

The classroom disagreement was picked up by the press and by bloggers and received media attention locally and nationally.

In response, a faculty group, including Professor Kaplan, issued a statement that, among other things, reaffirmed the faculty’s responsibility and duty to engage students in the free and frank exploration of ideas, simultaneously acknowledging the importance of understanding the experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives of students. The faculty also responded by holding the March 20 teaching forum.

The forum, organized by Professors Jane Larson and Howard Erlanger, included a faculty panel. Professors Carin Clauss, Pilar Ossorio, and Cheryl Rosen Weston all spoke about their strategies for teaching controversial and sensitive material and for creating a classroom environment that encourages student participation. They discussed the pedagogical, intellectual, and psychological issues that arise when

choosing to teach controversial and sensitive material, and they examined the personal and professional risks and rewards involved. After the panel spoke, questions and comments were taken from the audience. Students and professors contributed, with the emphasis on problem-solving that focused on the future, concluding that although raising sensitive or controversial issues can be difficult, it is a necessary and important part of legal education.



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efforts to expand global opportunities for our students and faculty, and an appropriate next step for the Law School, with its long tradition of international engagement,” says Heinz Klug, Director of the Center and UW Professor of Law. Klug will work closely with Associate Director Sumudu Atapattu in developing the center’s programs

and outreach activities.

Klug notes that Law School faculty members have been active abroad, teaching, conducting research, and working to enhance legal education and practice on every continent. “We will continue to promote this engagement by building on our international resources, such as our highly successful East

Asian Legal Studies Center; our opportunities for foreign lawyers to do research at the Law School; our student exchange programs with prominent law schools in Africa, Europe, and Latin America; and our connections with other international and area studies programs across campus,” Klug says.