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## From the Dean

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# From The Dean . . .

I am often asked about our law school's ranking. It is true that over the past few years, several raters have placed us in the top 20 law schools in the country. Alumni check with me from time to time to see if we have risen a few notches. Students anxious to impress their employers ask what it will take for U/B Law School to make it into the top ten. When people begin to take rankings that seriously, I tend to feel wary.

Let's face it. Any ranking of law schools is bound to be imprecise. We do not meet each other in combat on Saturday afternoon so that wise observers can rank us on Monday morning. Most lawyers know one law school well, their own, and next to nothing about all others. So-called objective data such as median LSAT's of students, number of articles published by faculty, and size of library tell one little about what is happening educationally with the students and intellectually within the faculty. Most raters know nothing about whether faculty are rewarming someone else's ideas in someone else's casebook or giving original thought to the shape of the law to come in their field. The former is pedestrian legal education; the latter is exciting and valuable.

Our law school is rather special. It is remarkably open to new ideas, novel approaches to teaching and different perspectives that have been stultified in legal education elsewhere. Faculty have arrived here from many different paths. Some have had extensive practice, some practically none, some have Ph.D.'s or other graduate education as well as law degrees, some have law degrees only, some have already published extensively, others, very little. Some place legal analysis and a practitioner's orientation at the center of their work; others concentrate more on law as social theory and intellectual history. This mixture makes this School function remarkably well.

These developments are not new. As our senior alumni know, for at least 50 years, the School has provided a comfortable setting for teachers from both inside and outside the mainstream of legal education.

There are other important, but immeasurable, qualities that distinguish this law school. Many law schools are fond of displaying the LSAT and undergraduate grade averages of their

students; they enjoy comparing their numbers with those of other schools and those from previous years, as if numbers were the final word on student quality. We all know that they are not, but we tend to ignore that fact because numbers communicate more directly than complex explanations. Law teachers know that the numbers

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are at best only a rough measure of quality. They also know that the better law students are those who have developed habits of thinking hard and creatively about problems, those who can identify subtle differences in ideas and trace the practical consequences and theoretical assumptions of proposals and solutions, and those who enjoy learning and do not seek refuge in the friendly confines of what they already know. The typical law school application reveals these academic habits only rarely. Yet, in recent years the intellectually adventurous student has appeared in greater numbers at Buffalo. Slowly, students who are comfortable in a thought-provoking environment are coming to recognize the special attractions of a Buffalo legal education. The qualities of diversity and innovation in the faculty appeal to the creative and curious student and give the Law School a distinctive stamp.

These special qualities are not lost in the search for recognition among the legal profession. As many know, the Law School has devoted considerable effort and expense to placement over the past decade, mainly because the doors of the profession have often had invisible barriers. Some considerable progress has been made in opening new territory, progress not measured only by number of offers, percentage of graduates employed, or new associates in big city firms. Graduate satisfaction counts highly and so do indications of quality. We have been told on many occasions by hiring partners in major New York City firms that a Buffalo student was the best summer associate among a

group that included stars from all of the elite schools. That firm is doing more than complimenting a student. It is, in effect, endorsing and embracing the distinctive quality of our law school.

Another indicator of our stature is alumni appreciation and loyalty. Again we can point to numbers. Membership in the Alumni Association, contributors and contributions, all have moved upward at a rapid pace. But they paint an incomplete picture. In the aftermath of the SUNY merger, the feelings of a loss of heritage were prevalent among our alumni. Though the State, through its support of new facilities, modest tuition and expansion of student places, opened the Law School to many, the graduates of the old and new Eagle Street buildings felt estranged. No law school can prosper among the enmity or even indifference of its alumni, no matter what the level of financial support from the State. The attitudes of the alumni shape a school's aspirations and its reputation. In recent years, I am happy to say, a reconciliation has taken place, and the bond between the school and its alumni has strengthened. The quality of alumni affection and respect has grown along with the number of active supporters.

To conclude, the Law School has built on its traditions and gathered a faculty which as a group is the most interesting and inventive in legal education today. It is attracting a student body that is increasingly independent-minded, curious and creative. Gradually legal employers, whether they are public, private, large, small, near or far, are realizing that a Buffalo Law graduate is the match of or better than the product of a more prestigious school. And these advances have the solid backing of growing alumni pride and support. These realities may not be measured, counted or ranked, but they are the most meaningful evidence of our distinctive stature among the nation's best law schools.

Tom Headrick