Dean's Letter

Barry B. Boyer
University at Buffalo School of Law, boyer@buffalo.edu

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Letter from the Dean

"Together, we can get the job done."

The past academic year marked a real turning point for the Law School — one that we may someday look back on as the time when people, ideas and resources began to come together in a powerful force for change.

People are the most important part of the equation, and we were able to rebuild some lost faculty strength after the long financial drought. Nancy Staudt, Markus Dubber and John Sheffer are filling some of the curricular gaps caused by faculty departures, and bringing new energy into O’Brian Hall. In the clinics, Suzanne Tomkins, Lisa Allen Kril and Lauren Breen are contributing their experience and commitment to our successful program. And we have added five new Research and Writing instructors, so that we can offer a rigorous, full-year legal writing program to first-year students. Equally important, we’ve been able to keep most of our experienced faculty during the period of resource shortages, so that we have a strong team in place to begin implementing the New Curriculum.

The ideas were provided by the New Curriculum plan described in The Forum last year. The Planning Committee and the faculty as a whole have done an extraordinary job of putting together a package of reforms that is both exciting and realistic. Virtually everyone who has considered the New Curriculum — from our alumni to the State Legislature and the ABA accreditation team that visited us last spring — has agreed that we’re on the right track. That enthusiasm, in turn, has helped generate the financial resources to make it happen.

Those resources have come from several initiatives:

* SUNY Central agreed to revise the “benchmark” funding formula that determines our faculty-student ratios, and thus the dollar targets for our state budget allocation. When it is fully implemented two years from now, the revision should bring about $800,000 per year in new funds to the Law School’s budget. This will include about $200,000 for badly needed upgrades to Law Library collections and services, and as many as six new faculty hires. The University administration, Trustee Arnold Gardner and the officers of our Alumni Association deserve our thanks for their support in this crucial initiative.

* The State Legislature enacted a $260,000 one-time appropriation for the computer technology and related equipment needed to implement the New Curriculum. State Senator (and Law School alumnus) Dale Volker took the lead in securing this appropriation, with crucial support from Senator John Daly.

* The University also agreed to a modest reduction in Law School enrollments over the next few years — from the current level of about 260 new students per year to a new target of 210 per class. This will help us begin implementing the New Curriculum more rapidly, and eventually ease some of the pressure when our graduates enter the employment market.
Implementation of the New Curriculum will increase our need for teaching and office space, as we add new faculty and offer more small classes. The University administration has responded by agreeing to work toward giving the Law School full control over O’Brian Hall.

The clinics have been very successful in obtaining outside grants to support both ongoing programs and new ventures such as the Domestic Violence Clinic, which recently received a grant of $276,000 from the U.S. Department of Education. Clinic Director Nils Olsen and his staff have used their advocacy skills to good effect in preparing these funding proposals.

All in all, it has been an extraordinary year — one we can all look back on with pride. But a lot still remains to be done.

Even with the new faculty we expect to hire over the next two years, we will still be about 8 to 10 faculty short of what we need to implement the New Curriculum fully. Our salary structure is lagging behind competitor law schools, which will make it increasingly difficult to keep our experienced faculty. And we need more discretionary “venture capital” to support promising new ideas. The Domestic Violence Clinic, for example, came very near closing its doors because the Law School didn’t have enough discretionary funds to keep it operating until grant funding could be secured.

To address these problems, and to finish the job that we’ve started with the New Curriculum, we have to upgrade our private giving — from general alumni contributions and from major donors, from foundations, government agencies and corporations — to levels comparable to those enjoyed by other leading public law schools. Virtually without exception, the margin between “good” and “great” in American public law schools comes from private fundraising. We have to organize ourselves, and make the case, that UB Law deserves that level of support.

We also need to have our alumni more effectively organized to participate in the state legislative process, when crucial interests of the Law School and the University are at stake. Once again, most of the leading public law schools are far ahead of us in this respect, and we need to expand our already strong base of support. Our alumni leaders will play a key role in this effort to strengthen our base of alumni support. And those of us in the Law School need to increase our efforts to “get the word out” about what a good thing we have going at Buffalo — to generate more visibility and credibility for the New Curriculum and other Law School programs.

This is a very ambitious agenda — but our success last year shows that, together, we can get the job done.