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Facing Challenges and Accelerating Our Trajectory of Excellence

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We all know that law schools and the legal profession are undergoing soul-searching. At SUNY Buffalo Law School, we are engaging in serious conversations about how to respond to the challenges facing our industry and profession. We have had to reflect anew on what being a lawyer means for you, us and our society. It is no secret that in the last several years, law schools and the legal profession have come under severe attack. We have been heavily critiqued by students, the public, our clients and even fellow lawyers. While some of that critique is fair and deserved, much of it is unfair and unfounded.

There are some things we can – as a profession – do better. We need to align tuition better with social and market demands. We need to increase diversity in law schools and in the profession. We need to do a better job with graduate employment. We need to serve our clients better, and with compassion and empathy. We need to adapt our curricula to the changing global economy and the emerging and unmet needs in society. We need to teach and practice law with a more robust social conscience. At SUNY Buffalo Law School, we are already doing most of these things. But we need to do more, and I promise you that we will.

We are determined to face these challenges and accelerate our trajectory of excellence. On May 8 and 9, UB President Satish K. Tripathi and I convened a panel of distinguished academics and lawyers to better understand these challenges and position ourselves to address them. As you know, over the past four years, SUNY Buffalo Law School has made significant progress toward achieving its goal of becoming a national leader in legal education and scholarship. Looking to the future, our collective goal is to further enhance SUNY Buffalo Law School’s excellence in education, scholarship and service to our local and global communities. Accomplishments over the last few years provide a strong foundation for us to continue to build our reputation, serve as a unique resource to aspiring lawyers in New York State and around the world, and achieve our goal to be a “top 50” ranked law school.

The distinguished panel was composed of Tom Sullivan, the recently appointed president of the University of Vermont; Charles Ogletree, professor at Harvard Law School; Jim Chen, the dean at the University of Louisville Law School; and Kent Syverud, the dean at Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. They were joined by Pamela Davis Heilman ’75, UB Council member and member of the Law School Dean’s Advisory Council. These nationally recognized panelists met with key stakeholders – including faculty, staff, students, senior SUNY Buffalo Law leadership, external constituents and key alumni. Our panel will prepare a forward-looking set of recommendations for us to consider as we advance our ambitious vision for the Law School.

The panel led discussions on many issues, including the recruitment of outstanding students in a climate of decreasing law school applications nationwide; enhancing career opportunities for our current and future students in light of an increasingly tight job market; recruiting and retaining outstanding faculty; and increasing fundraising capacity to support the school’s objectives. We are grateful to them for sharing their wisdom and expertise with our community.

In spite of the challenges we face, there is no doubt in my mind that the legal profession is the most indispensable calling in a democracy. We are a noble profession. The rule of law – the difference between democracy and autocracy – pivots on the legal profession. Lawyers work at the intersection of power and powerlessness. It is our duty to reduce powerlessness and hold power accountable. This is a high calling indeed.

I believe SUNY Buffalo Law School will emerge out of the current situation even stronger and more ready to serve our fellow citizens. With your help, the Law School will play its role in charting a new and better course for our profession.