All Together Now: Faculty Committees Ensure Broad Buy-In to the Mission of UB Law

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Faculty committees ensure broad buy-in to the mission of UB Law

It's lonely at the top—but not that lonely.
The leadership of the Law School, recognizing that such a large and complex enterprise needs the voices and vision of all its stakeholders, counts on a diversity of working committees to share the load of governance.

More than two dozen standing committees, drawing on the diverse talents of faculty members, administrators and a few students, meet regularly to provide guidance on a wide range of issues.

“In my time at the Law School, I cannot remember such a flurry of activity by the committees,” says Dean Makau W. Mutua. “The vibrancy and vitality of these committees has not always been there. They were sleepers. But when I became dean, I promised the faculty that the committees would become real and that they would become forums for debating and deciding the fate of the Law School.”

The dean says such a structure comports with his insistence on openness and transparency on the third floor of O'Brian Hall. “If you run a law school that is essentially unhappy—you don’t communicate with students, you are not open with the faculty, you are opaque—the chances are you are running a failing law school,” he says. “The dean of a law school becomes more effective if he or she is inclusive and walks in tandem with the faculty.”

Dean Mutua nominally chairs many of the committees. But he has delegated much responsibility for running and reporting on the committee work to two fellow administrators: Professor James A. Gardner, vice dean for academic affairs, and James R. Newton, vice dean for administration.

“These committees are a means to get broader input into all the things that go into running the Law School,” Newton says. “The dean charges the committees to look at various issues and then make policy recommendations.”

In addition, notes Gardner, participation in the committee structure is, for faculty, construed as service to the Law School—one of the key considerations that go into tenure and promotion decisions.

The implications of the committees’ work for life at the Law School can be significant. Recently, Gardner and Newton say these working groups have made major contributions in several areas. A small sampling of their work:

• A program to observe classes taught by adjunct faculty and provide feedback, to ensure a high standard of teaching in the classroom.
• Ongoing input into admissions decisions, especially for students in the broad midrange of the applicant pool.
• In process, a stronger and broader policy against academic dishonesty.
• A new policy on the hiring and retention of research and writing faculty, and an extensive new policy regarding the hiring and use of adjunct faculty.
• New policy guidelines for accommodating the needs of students with disabilities.
• A complete restructuring of UB Law’s legal skills program.
• Major work on the Law School’s use of technology, particularly as it relates to teaching. “We wanted to really aggressively think about how we are going to use technology,” Newton says. “We have been hiring a lot of new faculty who are using more technology in the classroom, as are faculty at other law schools. We will be purchasing some new software and are planning to make major technology upgrades to several of our classrooms.”

“The faculty can speak best to what their needs are, and what's changing out there in terms of teaching and legal academia, so that we as an administration can make the right purchases and plans for the Law School.”