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Re: New Environmental Initiatives

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Re: New environmental initiatives

Clean energy, air and water: The new Environmental and Natural Resources Law Program will educate a new generation in some of the most pressing challenges of our time.

The Law School will be part of a major new University at Buffalo initiative to support research on energy, environment and water, bringing legal expertise to bear on issues involving these life-giving resources and solidifying the school’s reputation for excellence in environmental law.

UB’s RENEW Institute – the acronym stands for Research and Education in Energy, Environment and Water – brings together faculty in six academic units for interdisciplinary work. It’s part of the Realizing UB 2020 Initiative, which seeks to bolster the University’s reputation in research, scholarship and innovation. RENEW comes with a $30 million commitment over 10 years to support this work, including the hiring of a high-profile program director.

At the Law School, the curriculum and faculty concentration in environmental law will be renamed the Environmental and Natural Resources Law Program. The school’s core strength in environmental law currently includes four professors: Professor Kim Diana Connolly, a specialist in wetlands law policy; international environmental law scholar Professor Errol Meidinger; Professor Irus Braverman, focusing on the transnational governance of forests, animals and biodiversity; and Associate Professor Jessica Owley, with expertise in conservation easements.

The school also has benefited from the teaching and scholarship of Emeritus Professor Barry B. Boyer and Professors R. Nils Olsen and Robert I. Reis, and counts among its adjunct faculty several practitioners with expertise in environmental law. The RENEW funding will also enable the hiring of at least one new full-time law faculty member in this area.

In addition to the Law School, RENEW participants include the School of Architecture and Planning, the College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, the School of Management and the School of Public Health and Health Professions.

“RENEW’s three pillars – energy, environment and water – are dear to the Buffalo Niagara region and critical to the future of our globe,” says Law School Dean Makau W. Mutua. “The work of the initiative has the potential to make UB a global destination for scholars and policymakers. Importantly, RENEW will educate a new generation of UB students in some of the most pressing challenges of our time. The Law School is very pleased to be a partner with other depar-tmental units in this exciting and promising initiative. I believe it opens a new frontier for thinking about synergistic pursuits at UB.”

“SUNY Buffalo Law has had an environmental program that has done amazing work over the years,” says Connolly, who also serves as the Law School’s vice dean for legal skills and clinical director. “Now we’re going to be able to reinvent a program that has been strong in the past to take advantage of opportunities across departments. The environmental clinic under my management, for example, will be interdisciplinary and doing trans-border work. Students will walk out of the clinic having mastered how international, federal, state and local laws of two nations work on the ground with respect to specific issues.”

Another successful initiative in this area is the Law School’s Healthy Homes Practicum. Students participating in the practicum provide legal support to the National Green and Healthy Homes Initiative, which has
chosen Buffalo as one of 17 pilot cities for its work in promoting safer housing. Among the work produced by practicum students is a 36-page publication called “A Neighborhood’s Continuing Evolution: An Environmental Justice Walking Tour of Buffalo, NY’s West Side.”

In addition to the increased resources and interdisciplinary opportunities available to law students, such as greater access to faculty with advanced degrees in environmental sciences, Connolly notes that students from other departments will now be able to take relevant Law School courses, enabling a further exchange of information and ideas.

Meidinger, who served on the RENEW planning committee at the University level, says the initiative represents a recommitment by UB to the focus of the Environment and Society Institute, a University-wide effort of which he was founding director. That institute suffered from limited resources, he says, but nevertheless involved about 150 faculty affiliates from 20 University units and did important research on community environmental problems such as arsenic and other chemicals in industrial brownfields, as well as deepening curricular options for the interdisciplinary study of the environment.

“There was general agreement that ESI was a promising and important program,” Meidinger says, “but that it was under-resourced. The idea now is for the University to found a center with a more serious level of resources that can both build on our strengths and fill in key faculty gaps, so that we can institute sound, enduring, sustainable interdisciplinary study in this area.”

He notes also that as the search for a RENEW director begins, Owley serves on the search committee and represents the Law School’s ideas and interests in that process.

At the Law School, the expectation is that these increased cross-departmental opportunities and further faculty strength in environmental and natural resources law will attract more talented students with an interest in the field. To support that, the school has designated one of its most attractive scholarships as the Environmental Law Research Scholarship. The $2,500 award will pay a student in his or her second and third years to conduct research with any or all of the faculty members who do environmental law work.

“As the University has moved to invest sizable resources into environmental and natural resources work, we thought a natural outcome would be to give our newly admitted law students broad exposure to the work of our faculty in this area,” says Lillie Wiley-Upshaw, vice dean for admissions and student life. “We expect this scholarship will attract highly motivated students who really care about this important work.”