A Message from Dean Makau Mutua

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We want to be great – not just good

The spring is now in full bloom, signifying the vitality of the season. This is a great cue, because there has never been a better time to be a member of the larger UB Law community. Just as the change of the season reflects a new beginning, the reforms that are occurring at UB Law are nothing short of a renaissance. Over the past year, we have attracted an excellent student body, hired new faculty with star potential, brought good governance and accountability in the Law School, and forged deeper relationships with our alumni, the bench and the bar. And we have reached out to Albany to make our case for support since we are the only public law school in the SUNY system.

Commencement at UB Law this year will be very memorable for our graduates and the community. It will be headlined by Prime Minister Raila Odinga of Kenya, who will deliver the Commencement Address on the rule of law. Prime Minister Odinga is one of the most charismatic politicians of our times. The commencement will also be special because SUNY will confer honorary doctorates to two prominent lawyers and global citizens. Irene Khan, the secretary-general of Amnesty International, the world’s largest and most influential human rights organization, will be one of the honorees. The other will be Mason Davis Jr., ’39, a civil rights attorney who played an important role in the desegregation of Alabama in the 1960s.

You will recall that last year’s entering class was the most qualified in our history as measured by LSAT and GPA statistics. It was also diverse. As a result of that stellar class, the caliber of our applicant pool has gone up this year. We have every expectation that we will hold, and perhaps exceed, last year’s achievements. The academic profile of our student body is a big factor in our standing among law schools, and is a central plank for our push to be a top 50 law school in the country. This is one of the measures of academic excellence, and we are pursuing it vigorously. But I want you to assure you that we are doing so while constructing a law school that looks like America. I could not be more pleased with the new faculty that we have hired over the past year. We have hired six new faculty with star potential. Last fall, we hired Professor Stuart Lazar (JD Michigan) to teach tax and Professor Ruqaijah Yearby (JD Georgetown) to teach public health law. Four new faculty will join us in this fall. Professor Michael Halberstam (JD Stanford, PhD Yale) for civil procedure and civil rights law; Professor Wentong Zheng (JD, PhD Stanford) will teach commercial law; Professor Tara Amlash (JD Yale) will teach international law and human rights; and Professor S. Todd Brown (JD Columbia) for bankruptcy, torts and corporations. These new professors have practice experience in major firms or organizations.

We are also becoming a destination for renowned faculty around the country. Professor Angela Harris from Berkeley Law School, a nationally known scholar in criminal law, will join the Law School in the fall as a visiting professor and Baily Center Distinguished Scholar for the year to teach criminal law. We know she will greatly enrich our law school, and look forward to welcoming her among us. Even though the economic crisis has hit us hard, we hope to hire several more faculty next year because of several departures. Professors Janet Lindgren, Judy Scales-Trant and Barry Boyer are retiring, and Professor Markus Dubber is leaving for the University of Toronto.

I believe that the mission of the Law School is to produce great attorneys and influential scholarship. In this regard, we are taking steps to create a rich and balanced curriculum. That is why we created this spring the Legal Skills Program to bring curriculum and administrative rationale, oversight and coherence to all skill offerings. The Legal Skills Program will be headed by a tenured faculty member. We are carrying out internal reforms geared to more accountability and transparency in all our operations – academics, teaching and scholarship by faculty, oversight and coherence in our adjunct faculty, faculty governance and quality control across the board. All the units in the Law School – admissions, technology, communications and alumni relations, the law library, development, placement and the registrar’s office – are being capacitated to fulfill their missions. We have instituted town-hall meetings with students every semester to openly hear their concerns.

I believe that UB Law must be a national law school, not a regional one. The Law School of the future must have ambitions that are national and international in scope. Our curriculum and long-term planning reflect these goals. We are reaching out to all our alumni across the country to establish structures of support and advice. This is vital because no law school can aspire to greatness without the vibrant
Sharing a wealth of learning

As both a justice of the state Court of Appeals and a UB Law alumnus, Eugene F. Pigott Jr. ’73 has a foot in two worlds. He wanted those worlds to meet – and the result went beyond all expectations.

“We had sat in the 4th Department in the Letro Courtroom at the Law School,” Pigott says. “But we were limited as to what we could and couldn’t do. So I thought, maybe we want to invite the faculty to come to the mountain. We started talking about it, and once the dean got into it, it just seemed to click.”

What followed was billed as “A Briefing for the Judiciary on Recent Law Faculty Scholarship.” Held March 5 in the majestic wood-paneled Ceremonial Courtroom of Erie County Hall in downtown Buffalo, the gathering brought jurists of all levels together to hear brief presentations by six UB Law School faculty on their research. A copy of the Law School’s 2008 Faculty Scholarship brochure was distributed. About 35 judges and faculty members attended, and following the presentation they enjoyed a reception hosted by Francis M. Letro ’79.

“They knocked our socks off,” Pigott says of the faculty presenters. “I have gotten so many responses from judges saying this was an incredible thing to do.”

Professor Errol E. Meidinger, vice dean for research and faculty development, spoke of the importance of research to the school’s mission. “I firmly believe that research advances teaching,” he said. “The more I grapple with trying to get insights into something, the better I am as a teacher; the less formulaic, the more I can push students to see where the soft spots are and where the hard spots are. A strong research program is absolutely essential to respect in the world of law schools.”

The faculty members who spoke were Professors Charles Patrick Ewing, Susan V. Mandgold, Robert S. Berger, James A. Gardner and James Wooten, and Associate Professor Ruqaijah Yearby.

“What we have done here today is a down payment for what we will do in the future,” Dean Makau Mutua said to the assembled jurists. “Today we talked at you. In the future, we want to create opportunities for dialogue between us.”

Court of Appeals Justice Eugene F. Pigott Jr. ’73 addresses faculty and judiciary.

Professor Robert S. Berger talks with Family Court Judge Lisa Bloch Rodwin ’85.
When Dean Makau Mutua invited Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Amolo Odinga to address the Law School's 2009 Commencement on May 23, he cited the tie between the school's tradition of teaching and scholarship in human rights law and Mr. Odinga's embodiment of the power of the rule of law to create and safeguard human rights.

"Prime Minister Odinga is one of Africa's celebrated human rights and pro-democracy leaders. He is certainly the most prominent and electrifying politician in Kenya, and is regarded as the center of gravity of that country's politics. He holds the distinction of having been Kenya's longest-serving political detainee because of his opposition to tyranny. He seemed a natural choice given our law school tradition in human rights and his life's epic struggle to bring democracy, the rule of law and human rights in Kenya."

In the East African nation's 1997 general election for president, Mr. Odinga finished third out of 15 candidates as the candidate of the National Development Party. As the candidate of the new Orange Democratic Movement, he ran for president again in 2007. Following the disputed general election, a coalition government was formed, and Mr. Odinga became Kenya's second prime minister, with the authority to coordinate and supervise government functions.

Born in Maseno in Kenya's western Nyanza Province, Mr. Odinga attended high school in Kenya and then earned bachelor's and master's degrees in mechanical engineering in Germany. He then returned to Kenya, where he taught in the Department of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Nairobi.

From 1975 to 1982, Mr. Odinga served as deputy director of the Kenya Bureau of Standards. He has studied at the British Standards Institution in London, the National Bureau of Standards in Washington, D.C., and the University of Denver.

Irene Zubaida Khan, the first woman, first Asian and first Muslim to head the world's largest human rights organization, led the organization through challenging developments in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001, confronting the backlash against human rights, broadening the organization's work in economic, social and cultural rights, and initiating a process of internal reform and renewal to enable the organization to respond flexibly and rapidly to world events. She has also focused attention on women's human rights and violence against women.

Irene Zubaida Khan studied law at The Victoria University of Manchester, UK, and Harvard Law School, specializing in public international law and human rights.

J. Mason Davis Jr. '59 was the first African-American to practice as a senior partner of a major Alabama law firm, Sirote & Permutt. As the attorney for a number of students who participated in the Huntsville lunch counter sit-ins during 1961 and 1962, Mr. Davis played a key role in the desegregation of Alabama. He argued and won every matter at the Court of Appeals and as a result of those legal victories and others, the state of Alabama desegregated all public facilities, including its schools.

Mr. Davis was an adjunct faculty member at the University of Alabama Law School for 25 years. Active with the Alabama Democratic Party, he was selected by Gov. Bob Riley to serve on the state's Citizens' Constitution Commission.