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Building Up, Reaching Out: the Law School Will Play A Major Role in the University's Civic Engagement and Public Policy Initiative

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Law School Report

UB 2020



The Law School will play a major role in the University's civic engagement and public policy initiative

Building up, reaching out

From left to right, Dr. Kate Foster, director of the Regional Institute, and Laura Mangan, special assistant to the Law School dean for civic engagement and public policy. The Regional Institute will be one of the flagship tenants of a third, downtown campus located in the UB Downtown Gateway – the former M. Wile Building.

The Law School is an integral element of UB 2020, the University at Buffalo's far-reaching plan to expand, improve academically, and achieve national prominence. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the segment of the strategic plan focused on civic engagement and public policy. Now Law School faculty and administrators are being challenged to think in new ways about how their scholarship and service can be leveraged to improve the quality of life in Western New York, New York State and beyond.

UB Law has a long history of making a difference in the community. Such strengths as the school's extensive clinical legal education program, the Regional Institute, and the interdisciplinary Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy have long been a positive force in the community, particularly in the area of public policy. So the Law School is in a position of leadership as the University looks to identify and build on such work.

The new focus on civic engagement and public policy, says former Dean Nils Olsen, "has an educational as well as a scholarly component. It also pulls together a lot of other activities that the University engages in previously without much coordination or self-identification.

"This is an area in which people are already extraordinarily engaged, obviously," Olsen says. "We have a terrific body of scholarship that demonstrates that we are committed to civic engagement and public policy.

The idea is to really integrate this into the life of the University, not only its scholarly life but its engagement with the community."

Dr. Kate Foster, director of the Regional Institute, a research and policy center that is now a unit of the Law School, identifies four ways the Institute carries out this strategic strength:

- Contract work for regional clients in government, business and foundations. Recent examples are a study for Erie County on alternatives to incarceration and a tourism management plan for seven Southtowns municipalities to assess and develop their tourism potential.

- Research and policy studies addressing topics in regional governance, economies and demographic change. These include MacArthur Foundation-funded work on "building resilient regions" as well as the award-winning policy briefs series highlighting regional policy topics.

- Online information resources for media, public officials, scholars, grant writers and other regional interest groups. Prominent among these are the institute's extensive Regional Knowledge Network offering data, maps, contact lists and studies, and findings of the ongoing State of the Region performance indicators project.

- Public forums and conferences that directly engage policy-makers and the general public. These include the October 2007 Symposium on Change in Buffalo Niagara and its Region's Edge series highlighting issues at the international border.

Foster notes also that as UB expands geographically, the Regional Institute will be one of the flagship tenants of a third, downtown campus located in the UB Downtown Gateway—the former M. Wile Building and the newest building on the growing downtown campus, located at 77 Goodell St.

With the appointment of a former longtime Baldy Center administrator as special assistant to the Law School dean for civic engagement and public policy, the Law School expands its role in this important focus of the UB 2020 effort. In her new role, Laura Mangan will facilitate, coordinate and at times help implement applied faculty research involving civic engagement and public policy.

“Faculty research and scholarship is often informed by pressing or persistent concerns,” Mangan says. “We want to encourage faculty to continue to do this kind of research. We are a public research university, and part of our mission must be to serve the public.”

Mangan has the multifaceted responsibility of coordinating work in civic engagement and public policy throughout the University. In the position, she will work in cooperation with and under the guidance of the Faculty Advisory Committee overseen by the Deans’ Coordinating Committee.

She notes that the strategic strength has five initial areas of focus:

- Creating resilient communities and sustainable economies.
- Reaching across borders.
- Improving public health.
- Advancing pre-K through 16 education.
- Preparing leaders in public policy.

In those broad categories, she and her colleagues will conduct a census of current faculty research and teaching, and will bring together groups of faculty from multiple disciplines in each research area. One measure of success, she said, will be the fertile cross-pollination, so familiar in the Baldy Center, that takes place when scholars in different disciplines find common interest in scholarship and research projects. This should lead to more external grants coming to UB; many research grants are targeted for interdisciplinary endeavors.

“Civic engagement is not going to be for everybody,” Mangan acknowledges. “Members of the law faculty could be involved in other strategic strengths. Getting the University as a whole to reconsider the value of applied research is one of the great challenges and opportunities of this effort.”

Nevertheless, she said, Dean Olsen has been a champion of civic engagement and public policy in the Law School and University-wide, and much recent and current activity in the Law School fit nicely into this area.

The “service learning” work of the Law School’s 10 legal clinics, for example, “serves mostly the local community, but what they do sometimes has national and international applications.”

Other Law School examples of civic engagement:

- Law students in Professor Teresa Miller’s classes have documented on video the stories of survivors of domestic violence and the experiences of inmates at Attica State Prison.

- Professor Isabel Marcus’ longtime research on women’s international human rights and domestic violence, including exchange programs with scholars from Central and Eastern Europe, and planned train-

Regional Institute

Building a better Buffalo Niagara

One of the signature ways the Law School engages with the Buffalo Niagara community, and exerts its influence to improve the region, is in the Regional Institute. With its mission of “providing regional understanding and promoting regional progress,” the institute is a major source of unbiased information for policymakers, as well as a sponsor of scholarly study, conferences and projects that benefit the binational Buffalo Niagara region.

The Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth, as it was then known, was founded in 1997 by former State Sen. John B. Sheffer II, who maintains a presence at the institute as a senior fellow. Under the direction of Kathryn A. Foster, who took over in 2005, the institute has become a unit of the Law School and has broadened and deepened its work. In January 2007, the program changed its name, adopting the shorter moniker Regional Institute.

The institute marked its 10th anniversary in 2007 with a series of events, foremost among them a successful Symposium on Change that convened regional leaders and community members in October. It was also announced that the Regional Institute,

which has been housed in Beck Hall on UB’s South Campus, will become an anchor tenant of the University’s planned third campus in downtown Buffalo, a key support for UB’s push to develop its civic engagement and public policy presence.

At an anniversary reception following the Symposium on Change, Dean Nils Olsen reflected on the institute’s work and its place in the Law School.

The realignment that brought the institute into the Law School, he said, “has provided the Regional Institute with an academic home to reflect its dual mission of scholarship and public service. That placement makes sense in a lot of ways, because it reflects the interests that we in the Law School have in common with those who are deeply involved in the work of the Re-

“Even though it is housed within the Law School, the institute also engages with faculty in virtually every unit at UB, including engineering, arts and sciences, architecture and planning, social work and public health.”

– Dean Nils Olsen

gional Institute, and we can build on the synergies that result from those common interests.”

As examples, Olsen pointed to law faculty participation in a research project on the implications of the region’s aging population, and in a project investigating alternatives to incarceration in Erie County.

The Regional Institute also is co-sponsoring a Law School conference on governance of the region’s water resources, he said, and works closely with the Law School’s Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy on research projects, working groups and forums.

“Even though it is housed within the Law School,” Olsen noted, “the institute also engages with faculty in virtually every unit at UB, including engineering, arts and sciences, architecture and planning, social work and public health. It truly is an example of how we as scholars can work together, across disciplines, to be a central player in the University’s efforts toward civic engagement and public policy.”

ing for domestic violence prosecutors in Latin America.

- A planned 2009 interdisciplinary conference on water quality and boundary issues to coincide with the centennial of the Boundary Waters Treaty between the United States and Canada, in partnership with Ontario’s Brock University and other local academic institutions.

- The extensive work of the Regional Institute in resourcing and influencing policy-

makers in local and state governments.

- Conferences on public emergencies; law, Buddhism and social change; and other cross-disciplinary matters of public importance.

- Even a monthly report on Community Action & Student Engagement, offering law students opportunities to engage with the community in everything from human rights internships to providing blankets for homeless residents.