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A Teacher and Scholar Moves On

UB Law Forum

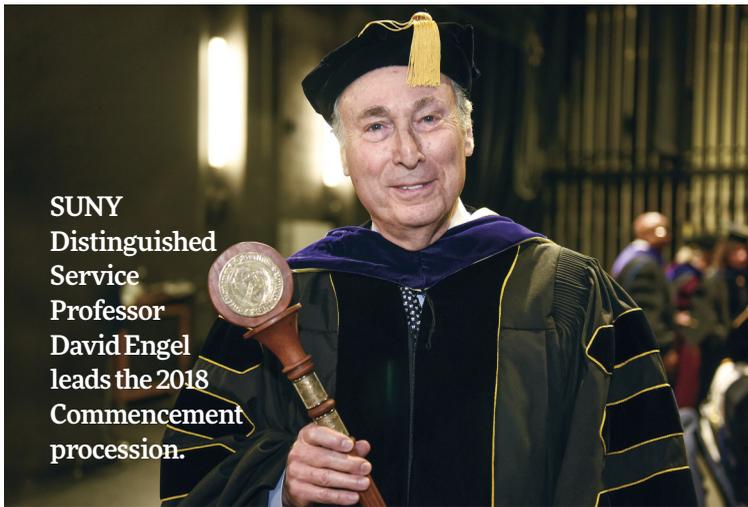
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SUNY
Distinguished
Service
Professor
David Engel
leads the 2018
Commencement
procession.

A teacher and scholar moves on

When UB School of Law graduates gather for an all-alumni reunion this October 20th, SUNY Distinguished Service Professor **David Engel** is planning a little something on the side: a reunion of the 50 or so alums who, as students, traveled with him to study the legal system of Thailand.

Many students say those January bridge-session trips opened their eyes to how law works in a societal context. The Thailand courses offered real-life exposure to the “law in action” – a key tenet of the Law and Society movement, for which Engel has been an influential leader.

Engel, who is retiring from his UB School of Law teaching duties after 37 years at the school, brought that same perspective to his classes in Buffalo, where he taught courses on torts and products liability and seminars on the tort law system, disability rights, and on law, culture and society.

“I just love teaching, the whole process of teaching,” he says. “It has been one of the most fulfilling things I’ve done. I loved working with students who are just beginning law school in the fall semester, starting with a complete blank slate and trying to help them understand, how do I acquire the knowledge I need and a method for learning more? And it has been so rewarding to see the careers that my students have gone on to, as judges, prosecutors, working in big and small firms, or doing public-interest work or government work.”

Even in retirement, he won’t lack for further opportunities to teach. Engel and Professor Lynette Chua, a law professor at the National University of Singapore, hope to launch a five-year program of 10 workshops, which he and Chua would organize and teach in Singapore. The goal is to train and mentor young Asian scholars and graduate students who conduct research in Asian law and society. He’ll also continue lecturing at Chiang Mai University in Thailand.

And the lecture invitations just won’t stop coming. This spring he delivered the annual addresses at both the Oxford University Centre for Socio-Legal Studies and Leiden University’s Von Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance, and Society. Engel is a former president of the Law & Society Association, the world’s premier organization for the interdisciplinary study of law. Last year he received the association’s highest honor, the Harry J. Kalven Jr. Prize, in recognition of his long and continuing work in interdisciplinary legal study.

Engel will stick around O’Brian Hall for much of the coming academic year, officially on research leave as he works on two new books and a couple of articles.

“What brought me here in the first place is also what has kept me here,” he says. “The law school is a special place. Its values are still somewhat unique in legal education – the importance of public service, along with an understanding that the law operates in a broader society. A really effective lawyer has to understand the social context as well as the law on the books. UB remains more dedicated to living that vision than most law schools.”

Details regarding our all-alumni reunion can be found on the back cover.

Engel’s academic impact

Associate Professor **Anya Bernstein**, who holds a Ph.D. in sociocultural anthropology, on the impact of Professor Engel’s life work:

“David’s influence ripples through the world of sociolegal studies, both through his own scholarly, intellectual contributions, and through his enthusiastic mentorship and support of others. In his research, he’s explored how community belonging influences our relation to law; and in practice, he’s worked tirelessly to put together communities that encourage creativity.

“For me personally, he’s been a crucial interlocutor: in his gentle and unassuming way, he’s pushed me to reconsider basic assumptions I’ve made about the things I study and helped me develop more nuanced understandings of them.”



Two books with an eye on society

In a happy coincidence, Cambridge University Press has released a one-two punch of David Engel-related books.

For the first, *Injury and Injustice: The Cultural Politics of Harm and Redress*, Engel was one of three co-editors.

Squarely in the law and society tradition, the book examines how cultures worldwide understand injury and its relation to the justice system.

Engel also contributed a chapter, titled “Chairs, Stairs, and Automobiles: The Cultural Construction of Injuries and the Failed Promise of Law.” It draws on the thinking that went into his 2016 book *The Myth of the Litigious Society*.

“The theory of tort law,” he says, “is that litigation will deter dangerous or risky behavior; it will compensate people when they suffer injuries and struggle with their medical bills and damaged careers; and it will provide a moral statement of who’s to blame when unnecessary risks are posed. But those promises fail if very few people with valid claims actually use the tort system.”

Injury and Injustice also includes chapters by UB School of Law **Professor Samantha Barbas** and by **Li Chen**, a former

UB dual degree law student sponsored by the Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy, who is now a history professor at the University of Toronto.

The other book grew from a Baldy Center conference that took place in 2015. In *Insiders, Outsiders, Injuries, & Law: Revisiting “The Oven Bird’s Song,”* legal scholars young and old take stock of a groundbreaking article by Engel first published in 1984. In that article, he examined how predominant norms and values in a rural Illinois county discouraged injury litigation, even when residents believed they had suffered serious wrongs. Engel argued that anxiety about social and economic changes in the community found expression in negative perceptions of tort claims as compared to positive perceptions of contract claims.

“‘The Oven Bird’s Song’ is such an enduringly influential work that law and society scholars around the world turn to David’s work again and again and again for insight and inspiration,” the book’s editor, UB sociology professor **Mary Nell Trautner**, writes in her introduction.

This book, too, includes a significant UB Law presence, with chapters by **Associate Professor Anya Bernstein** and **Emeritus Professors Alfred S. Konefsky** and **Lynn Mather**.



Growing the next generation of lawyers

“When I was in law school,” **Tolu Odunsi** remembers, “I developed great relationships with so many professors. They taught me a lot, and they empowered me to be a good lawyer. It’s my goal to do the same for the students who come through my classes.”

Those will be first-year UB School of Law students in the school’s foundational Legal Analysis, Writing and Research program, which Odunsi joins this fall as an instructor. She’ll teach two sections, with about 15 students each, joining her colleagues in delivering intensive instruction in the basics of legal research, analysis and argumentation.

It’s a new career juncture for Odunsi. She earned her J.D. at American University’s Washington College of Law, where she graduated *cum laude* and was a senior staff member of the school’s *International Law Review*. After graduation, a legal internship and a law clerkship, Odunsi worked as an associate attorney at the Buffalo law firm Gibson, McAskill & Crosby, practicing in the area of civil litigation.

But, she says, “It had always been a dream of mine to end up in academia,” and she feels a strong connection to UB School of Law, where she has been a mentor to students and has volunteered to judge the Black Law Students Association’s moot court competition. She also has strong connections in the local legal community; she currently serves as president of the Minority Bar Association of Western New York and on the board of the Center for Elder Law and Justice.

She recognizes that, as a younger lawyer, she has insight into the challenges that students of the millennial generation face in the classroom. “We’ve grown up having such quick access to information, and that’s in contrast to how learning is in law school,” Odunsi says. “You really have to take time with the material to understand the precedent. Legal research and writing isn’t a quick process, and it involves a lot of rewriting.”

A dream come true: When Odunsi was named last year to *Buffalo Business First’s* “30 Under 30” list of up-and-coming young professionals, she was asked to name her “professional goal before I turn 40.” Her answer: “Teach a law school class.”



Tolulope “Tolu” Odunsi