Masters of the Earth

UB Law Forum

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Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol32/iss1/18
At a time when businesses, politicians and activists are increasingly concerned with care for the environment, UB School of Law is equipping lawyers with the tools they’ll need to make sense of it all.

The school’s newly minted Environmental Law LL.M. program offers students the chance to deepen their knowledge of environmental law and policy. Like the master of laws programs in general law, criminal law and cross-border legal studies, the new one-year program includes specialized courses, experiential learning and one-on-one academic advising.

Though some make it a professional specialty, environmental law is not just a niche area of practice, says Professor Kim Diana Connolly, vice dean for advocacy and experiential education, who co-directs the program with Professor Jessica Owley.

“Whether advocating the position of a public interest group, a corporate client, a government agency or a private citizen, almost every area of legal practice today touches upon some aspect of environmental law,” says Connolly, an expert in wetlands law. “At a global level, critically important issues such as climate change, sustainability and transnational pollution require an understanding of environmental law and policy.”

In the program, students take at least 24 credits of coursework on topics including pollution control, greening Buffalo, land use, climate change law and policy, historic preservation law and international environmental law. They also complete a clinic, practicum or externship where they work directly with clients on real-world environmental disputes, and complete a capstone research project that engages their skills in analyzing environmental law issues and constructing arguments around those issues.

Already the program has its first graduate: Benjamin E. Wisniewski, who earned his J.D. from UB in 2014 and received his LL.M. degree (with honors) this year. Wisniewski is an associate attorney with the Buffalo-based law firm Lippes Mathias Wexler Friedman LLP, where he practices environmental and energy law and serves on the firm’s Government Investigations & Enforcement Actions Practice Team.

“Pursuing an LL.M. is a fantastic way to gain a deeper knowledge of a specific area of the law,” Wisniewski says. “This knowledge can be used to build a resume, enhance an existing career, or simply gain expertise in a growing area of jurisprudence. I specifically chose UB to pursue my master of laws degree because of the flexible curriculum that allowed me to tailor my education to the environmental, energy and local government law issues I deal with on a daily basis.”

That included his final research project, which addressed one area of focus in his practice: New York State’s process for siting new power plants.

“My capstone thesis addressed the relatively narrow issue of whether the local legislative power described in Article IX of the state Constitution is in direct conflict with the state legislature’s delegation of a discretionary pre-emption power to a state-level administrative sitting board,” Wisniewski says. “I concluded that much of the case law relating to Home Rule and state legislative pre-emption is based on a version of the state Constitution that no longer exists. I also concluded that Article IX of the state Constitution should be amended to more clearly state whether the legislative power wielded by local governments is organic and derived directly from the people, or instead merely derivative of the general legislative power vested in the state legislature.”

The Environmental Law LL.M. program builds on the school’s strength in this area of law. J.D. students may pursue a concentration in environmental law, work on cases in the Environmental Law and Policy Clinic, and publish in the Buffalo Environmental Law Journal. Faculty research interests include wetlands law and policy; international environmental law; the transnational governance of forests, animals and biodiversity; local environmental law; and conservation.

The University at Buffalo, too, has been an early leader in addressing environmental issues. A signatory of the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment, the University has pledged to minimize its adverse impact on the environment and achieve “climate neutrality” by 2030.
Our clinics

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<tr>
<th>Training more than 65 student attorneys (2016-17)</th>
<th>Empowering victims of domestic violence to break free from abuse</th>
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<td>Seeking accountability for veterans exposed to toxic smoke</td>
<td>Tackling national, state and local policy on animal welfare issues</td>
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<td>Reforming court secrecy rules to protect the public interest</td>
<td>Advocating for vital and cutting-edge environmental issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helping cancer care patients navigate civil legal problems</td>
<td>Providing over 8,130 clinical service hours (2016-17)</td>
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To learn more about how our clinic students are taught to change the world, visit: [www.law.buffalo.edu/clinics](http://www.law.buffalo.edu/clinics)