Extending Our Global Reach: High Hopes and Big Dreams as UB Goes International

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EXTENDING OUR GLOBAL REACH

It's a small world, after all. Nowhere is that more true than in the legal profession. Law schools are finding that they need to prepare future attorneys for practice in global contexts and are trying to become more international—and SUNY Buffalo Law School is moving aggressively as a leader in that direction.

Under the guidance of Dean Makau W. Mutua and Professor David A. Westbrook, the school’s newly appointed director of global strategic initiatives, the Law School is looking to coordinate and build on existing international engagements, and to institute some major new programs that will make SUNY Buffalo a truly international law school.

“The Law School has long maintained a global presence. In the coming years we plan to expand our footprint significantly in the international arena. As New York State’s public law school we are uniquely positioned to introduce international students to New York law and legal culture, which has become a lingua franca worldwide,” says Mutua.

“New York law is really important,” Westbrook says. “It is practiced all over the world. The New York State Bar Association has an international section; a huge percentage of New York lawyers are not in New York. Along with that, New York City is not just the center of financial markets and consequently law, it’s also a place for the lawful settlement of disputes, both in courts and through arbitration, from all over the world. And, of course, the United Nations is in New York, as is the New York branch of the Federal Reserve, which manages the world’s primary reserve currency. Taking all this together, New York law, both in the narrow sense of transactional practice and the larger sense of legal culture, is at the heart of global law. So New York law is an asset that the rest of the world has a genuine interest in. All of this gives us a strategic advantage.”

TWO YEARS AND DONE

The chief initiative, expected to begin this fall semester, is an accelerated program for students who already have earned a first law degree outside the United States. These highly qualified students, who will arrive with solid LSAT scores, will be given advanced standing, meaning that they can earn the J.D. degree in two years instead of the traditional three. These students will take the standard core courses that all first-years take, then pursue elective interests in their second year.

The program is expected to attract international students who wish to sit for the New York State Bar exam. The new program complements the two master of laws programs currently offered—the general LL.M. and the LL.M. in criminal law—which are also designed for international students. The LL.M. in criminal law will be strengthened by the addition, in the next academic year, of Professor Luis Chiesa to the faculty. Chiesa, cur-
High hopes and big dreams as SUNY Buffalo Law School goes international

Currently tenured at Pace Law School, is an internationally known criminal law scholar with extensive experience in Spain and Latin America, notably in the training of judges.

“We’re trying to create a range of ways that different kinds of people can study at SUNY Buffalo Law School,” Mutua says. “There will be the two-year J.D., the traditional three-year program, the master of laws programs, fellowship programs, and eventually, we hope, a Ph.D. program. As an international law school at a major research university, which both represents and serves New York, we want there to be a full spectrum of ways to participate.”

Says Westbrook, “All of this fits together, if you think of SUNY Buffalo Law as accomplishing its traditional goals – teaching, research and service – in the interplay of the world in New York, and New York in the world. The thing that we have that nobody else has, as a marketing matter, is our relationship to New York law. Even though we are the law school of the State University of New York, and New York is so important internationally, we’ve never really pushed that button and represented ourselves that way to the world.”

The Admissions Office and Joseph E. Schneider, director of post-professional and international education, are already gearing up recruiting efforts for the new two-year J.D. program, and for expansion of the existing LL.M. programs. Lillie Wiley-Upshaw,

Continued on Page 4
vice dean for admissions and student life, is excited about this new opportunity and agrees with Schneider that the applicant pool—foreign lawyers looking to deepen their knowledge of U.S. law—is largely the same for the current master of laws programs and the new accelerated J.D. program. Students should find the chance to spend an additional year in the United States attractive, they believe, as the LL.M. programs are a single academic year.

“The LL.M. program is fast,” Schneider says. “In the two-year program, students will have more opportunity to be immersed in the Law School and in American culture.”

In addition, he says, significantly increasing the population of international students in O’Brian Hall “will change the culture of the building,” adding new perspectives to class discussions.

English-language proficiency should not be a barrier, Schneider says, because students worldwide take the LSAT in English. Poor speakers of English wouldn’t achieve the high LSAT scores that will be a prerequisite for admission. According to Wiley-Upshaw, “We are trying to recruit a particular student. We want the perfect fit. It will not be for everyone, and at the same time we hope to continue to increase enrollment in our LL.M. programs.”

— Lillie Wiley-Upshaw, vice dean for admissions and student life

Continued from Page 3

The Law School’s international focus also incorporates an expected expansion of the school’s successful New York City Program in Finance and Law.

“The New York City program has a stunningly cool design,” Westbrook says, noting that students in the accelerated J.D. program will have the opportunity to participate in the program in their second year. “Moving forward, I want to think of New York as a place where we do programs, including the one we’re now doing. I’d like to see us there during the entire academic year, with more students doing more kinds of things. So we’d like to expand the New York City presence in terms of numbers and in terms of subject matter,” he says, citing commercial dispute settlement and public international law as two likely topics for future programs. Also under consideration is establishing a presence in Washington, D.C., that would complement the New York City program.

“We haven’t made study elsewhere a normal part of getting a degree at Buffalo, and we would like that. We would like it to be completely ordinary for our students to spend at least one of their semesters in one of the other places we teach, either in New York, or maybe in D.C., or someplace with which we have an exchange agreement, such as Glasgow, or perhaps at a third institution, in Sao Paulo or Sydney or whatever might make sense for that student’s education. And of course we’re looking to welcome more exchange students to Buffalo, too.”

Under its new director, Professor Meredith Lewis, the Canada-U.S. Legal Studies Centre is being reinvigorated. The center works to take educational advantage of Buffalo’s location on the Canadian border, which creates cross-
border legal practices, such as international trade and immigration that students can explore in the real world.

The school also will reinforce its relationships with other universities worldwide and look to establish others. Westbrook says. SUNY Buffalo Law already has student exchange relationships with law schools in Barcelona, Spain, and Glasgow, Scotland. In addition, Professor David Engel takes a group of law students to Chiang Mai, Thailand, each January during the bridge term; there they learn about Thai legal culture and share ideas about U.S. legal culture with members of the Chiang Mai academic community.

These student exchanges are augmented by a pioneer program of the New York State Bar Association’s International Law Section, initiated by Lauren D. Rachlin, a member of the international/cross-border practice group at the Buffalo office of the law firm Hodgson Russ. The program places SUNY Buffalo Law students in outbound legal internships worldwide. Last year students spent the summer in South America, Prague and Vienna. The internship program is expected to expand, and the Bar Association wants to establish a student chapter of the International Law Section at the Law School. “It is important to open the students’ eyes to what is out there,” says Rachlin. “They are working with civil law and other legal structures and they make lifetime contacts besides.”

SUNY Buffalo faculty have traditionally been engaged around the world. Westbrook hopes to build on this tradition by encouraging junior faculty to speak, teach and collaborate internationally, and perhaps by offering short courses. The highly successful fellowship program of the Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy brings talented scholars, many with international experience, to the Law School to research, teach and engage in informal networking. In the past several years, the Law School has hosted visiting scholars from Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Kyrgyzstan, Norway, Poland, Spain, Turkey and Zimbabwe. In addition, the recently established Baldy Center Fellowships in Interdisciplinary Legal Studies have drawn highly qualified young scholars, at the post-doctoral stage, from around the world. The center expects to establish more fellowship programs as well, and down the road would like to establish a Ph.D. program.

BY THE NUMBERS

All of these efforts, Westbrook says, are “very much integrated with UB 2020,” the University’s long-range strategic plan. (Wiley-Upshaw serves on the Law School’s Strategic Planning Committee.) “We are talking and listening to everyone throughout the Law School. As we think about our future we are intent on considering all possibilities,” says Wiley-Upshaw.

Says Mutua, “We are taking advantage, and will take more advantage, of being part of a major public research university. Making the Law School more international will make it more like the rest of UB, which is already one of the more international universities in the nation.”

“We have in New York the most important legal culture in the world. There is no reason why SUNY Buffalo Law School cannot be one of the great law schools in the country.”

“Significantly increasing the population of international students in O’Brian Hall will change the culture of the building.”

— Joseph E. Schneider, director of post-professional and international education