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## Listening to the Experts

UB Law Forum

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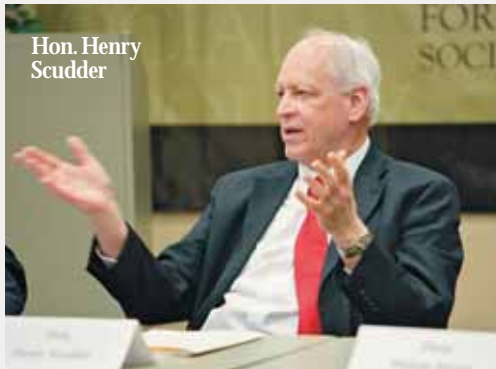
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## Listening to the experts



Joyce Y. Hartsfield



Hon. Henry Scudder



Makau W. Mutua and Craig Peterson '76



Hon. Rose Sconiers '73

As Law School administrators further refine the school's curriculum and programs to emphasize professional skill development, they aren't doing so in a vacuum. Two major initiatives in the past academic year have sought input from both members of the Law School community – students, faculty and staff – and from judges in the Western New York legal community.

"Gauging our progress" is the goal of UB Law's participation in the Law School Survey of Student Engagement, a national survey that produced a wealth of information specific to the school. The survey explored such themes as "To what extent do students devote time and energy to activities that further their education?" and "What policies and practices do schools use to encourage students to succeed, both academically and professionally?" The survey had a phenomenal 54 percent response rate among students.

The result is a thick book of charts, graphs and numbers – an indicator of where UB Law stands right now, and perhaps a map for future growth.

"The biggest benefit is benchmarking against yourself," says James R. Newton, vice dean for administration, who with Clinical Professor Suzanne E. Tomkins co-chaired a staff-faculty-student committee that administered the survey and analyzed the results. The committee presented an introductory PowerPoint presentation in two open sessions for the Law School community, then held a series of seven focus groups to discuss the survey results, generate ideas and suggest changes to practices and policies in response to the survey findings.

Newton says the school is committed to repeating the survey each year, both to measure progress and to continue to identify opportunities for improvement.

Another information-gathering effort took place in February, as LAWR faculty members heard from justices and others associated with the New York State Supreme Court. Together the judges and the instructors brainstormed ideas about what skills new lawyers need, how well the LAWR program is teaching them, and how the Law School could improve further toward that goal.

"UB Law is committed to producing practice-ready attorneys," said Dean Makau W. Mutua, who was present at the gathering. "That's why I called this meeting with the judges – to get their ideas on how we can enhance our research and writing curriculum to produce the best lawyers possible."

Representing the judiciary were two state Supreme Court justices: Hon. Henry Scudder, presiding justice of the Appellate Division, Fourth Department; and Hon. Rose Sconiers '73, also of the Appellate Division, Fourth Department. They were joined by Craig Peterson '76, chief Appellate Court attorney; Patricia Morgan, clerk of the court for the Appellate Division, Fourth Department; and, accompanying Justice Sconiers, Joyce Y. Hartsfield, executive director of the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission on Minorities, Unified Court System, Office of Court Administration, in New York City.

Fourteen Law School professors, administrators and staff also took part in the frank exchange of ideas.

Some comments revolved around a particular format used in the Appellate Division: the bench memo. Peterson described it like this: "We start off with the nature of the case, state the issues that the parties are raising, give a fact pattern overview of the case, give a fairly detailed summary of the record with citation to pages in the record, and then the law assistants will address issues that the parties have raised. They go on and do their own independent legal research. That will all be summarized in a discussion section.

"We caution the law assistants that it's not a law review article. It is supposed to summarize the law for the court so we can quickly get into the issue. Essentially that is what the work is, research and writing."

Peterson noted that "we have had many good law assistants from the University at Buffalo. We have hired more law assistants from the Buffalo Law School than from any other law school, and we have been very happy with them."