Cordes starts his year atop NIU Law

32-year veteran professor previews his time as interim dean, with eye on student employment

BY JACK SILVERSTEIN
Law Bulletin staff writer

In his 32 years at Northern Illinois University College of Law, Mark W. Cordes has seen the school from all angles but one: dean. Scratch that off the list. On June 1, Cordes took over as interim dean, replacing Jennifer L. Rosato-Perea, who is now dean of DePaul University College of Law.

Since taking the top spot, Cordes has spent time meeting with the school’s leaders, including outgoing meetings with Rosato-Perea.

“I learned there’s a lot of meetings for this job,” said Cordes, 64. “A lot of paperwork and a lot of unexpected things. It’s a little bit like whack-a-mole. But I also confirmed things I already knew: That we have a tremendous faculty, staff and students and a very supportive alumni base.”

Cordes’ contract as interim dean ends June 30, 2016.

In the meantime, he is preparing the school for its American Bar Association accreditation visit in 2017 and developing a new strategic plan to replace the current five-year plan expiring this year — along with, of course, all of the normal dean responsibilities, such as helping students find jobs.

Lastly, he plans to set the stage for the new dean, for whom a national search is underway. The law school has recently formed its search committee, which has had one meeting thus far.

In this interview with the Daily Law Bulletin, edited for space, Cordes discusses the school’s approach to student employment and how it pursues identities in both Chicago and DeKalb.

Law Bulletin: I know your meetings have included speaking with alumni. What are their concerns about the law school?

Cordes: Are there sufficient employment opportunities for lawyers in general? And some are raising questions about how the law school is coping with the declining enrollments that is happening nationally with law schools.

Law Bulletin: I would say the most important metrics are quality of student body, bar passage and employment outcomes.

Cordes: I think first of all, we need to educate our students on what opportunities are out there and get them thinking beyond just traditional legal practice if their passions are someplace else.

Second of all, we do have a very significant mentoring program. We try to line up a mentor with every incoming student and that person will remain a mentor throughout the person’s time here. That creates not only connections but also somebody to advise students in their job pursuits.

We are trying to create additional opportunities in Chicago through externships, while at the same time continuing our commitment to find opportunities throughout the state.

We take substantial pride that our students go to a variety of positions. A number go into public service with the state’s attorneys and public defenders, and a large number go into small and midsize private practice.

And then, of course, we have students going into less traditional areas such as compliance work, which is a growing area. And working for nonprofits in a number of dimensions. One part of what we try to do is help students find what their passions are and pursue it.

LB: The law school has its Chicago slogan — “closer than you think” — but also tells students that law school in DeKalb opens them to job opportunities in that area. Does the school want to be a Chicago school or a DeKalb-area school?

Cordes: I think we don’t try to push our students into any one particular area geographically. We send a number of our students to underserved areas — small towns and towns — and we send them to underserved practice areas, and we take enormous pride in that.

But at the same time, a number of our graduates are in Chicago, and we want to make sure that those sorts of opportunities remain and grow for our students.

So really, we want to be a school that permits people to pursue their interests not just vocationally but also geographically.

And I think that our affordability facilitates that a lot. Our students come out with a smaller debt load than the national average, and that really helps them to think in different terms of where they want to go and what they want to do.

LB: We talk a lot about stats and rankings when discussing law schools. What metrics are most important to you in evaluating a law school?

Cordes: I think we say the most important metrics are quality of student body, bar passage and employment outcomes.

Along those lines, we were recently over the summer ranked as one of the 10 most underrated law schools in a study based upon two criteria: the quality of the student body and employment outcomes.

It was a study by a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill law professor that basically just focused on those two criteria.

LB: How do you, personally, measure student-body quality?

Cordes: Realistically you can’t quantify completely student

Mark W. Cordes

Mark W. Cordes
body quality. So much goes into it beyond LSAT and GPA.

It includes experience, diversity, what one hopes to do with his or her law degree and just the type of person and the character that people have.

But the extent that you do try to quantify it, people do look at LSAT and undergraduate GPA. The study used LSAT.

**LB:** If you can't quantify student body quality, how can you measure it?

**Cordes:** You can't quantify a number of things completely, but you can make efforts to partially quantify it. The study used median LSAT and employment outcomes as reported by the ABA. And using those concrete numbers we came out quite well.

One other note: We were recently recognized as one of the best value law schools in America this year by National Jurist, and that is largely based on the affordability of the law school, our low debt load and employment outcomes.

**LB:** Final thoughts? What more do you want the CDLB readers to know about you and how your NIU will operate?

**Cordes:** I think we have a tremendous law school here and my job is made much easier by the faculty and the staff and the student body and the strong alumni base we have.

And I think that this is a year in which the school will continue to move forward building on the strong foundation left by former dean Jennifer Rosato Perea.

I think it will be a great opportunity for any new dean to come into.