Northern real-world exposure

NIU’s law school is the smallest in the state, but there are plenty of opportunities to go around

BY JACK SILVERSTEIN
Law Bulletin staff writer

The Chicago skyline isn’t visible from DeKalb and that suits the folks at Northern Illinois University College of Law just fine.

Their is a small-town school with a small-town feel, housed in a single building on the university’s campus. The school is like the bar in “Cheers,” a place where everybody knows your name.

That includes Dean Jennifer L. Rosato Perea, who knows many students personally.

“It’s a trait that impresses her students and her staff. "In my day, when I was in law school, the dean was a mythical figure," said Greg C. Anderson, the director of career opportunities and development who graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 1985. "I’m sure he was a nice man, but you just sort of hoped you never ran across him, because it usually wasn’t a good thing. That’s certainly not the case now.”

At NIU — with an enrollment of 313, it’s the smallest law school in the state — not only do students know the dean, but they know other members of the administration along with all of their professors. When Anderson walks through the law school, he’s likely to have two or three students greet him by name during a two- or three-minute walk.

The school knows the community’s name too — through clinics in Rockford and Aurora, students work directly with the people living around them and become ensconced in the surrounding culture.

Yet even though NIU is 66 miles west of Chicago, people at the law school treat the city like oxygen. They can’t see it, but they know they need it, and they’re glad it’s there.

“(The dean) is really always trying to increase our presence in Chicago," Anderson said.

“We’re pretty consistent, in that about 18 to 20 percent of my kids end up in Chicago every year. ... We draw most of our students from the metropolitan area, and we are trying to increase the number of opportunities for them in that area as well.”

The balance between serving nearby communities and staying tapped into the Chicago legal world is crucial to NIU’s appeal. Size, Anderson said, is key to their success.

“I like the size,” he said. “It’s small. It’s collegial. We do get to know the kids. And that helps them in many ways that they don’t even realize.”

Making NIU run

The bouncy, energetic woman with the multi-colored sneaker collection who founded a school-wide 5K race? That’s Rosato Perea.

The ideas-heavy networker who personally connects students to alumni? That’s Rosato Perea.

The campus leader who hosts pizza parties in the hallway outside her office so she can talk to students? Who has an open-door policy with students and faculty? Who teaches one course per year and grades her own papers? Who hosted an administrator meeting months before her job even started?

Well, you know.

“The first impression that I had of her during that meeting was her level of energy, which kind of bubbles over,” said Associate Dean David B. Gaebler, an assessment he made during the meeting Rosato Perea held with administration prior to her start in July 2009.

“She ran that meeting. It was not conducted with her sitting at the head of the table with an agenda. It was conducted more like a talk show. The faculty were all sitting at tables and she was on her feet, roaming around and talking and interacting with different faculty members.”

That’s when Gaebler, who came to NIU in 1983, knew the school had a winner.

Rosato Perea had several goals when she joined NIU from Drexel University School of Law in Philadelphia. Among the most important were fostering partnerships between the law school and other schools on campus and creating new clinics and externships.
Persuading faculty to create new programming is one thing. Persuading students to spend even more money on their education is another.

But that's exactly what Rosato Perea did with the academic excellence fee, a student-approved, student-funded pool of money—$2,880 per year for full-time students—for special programs such as bar preparation and student competitions.

Another key aspect to NIU's curriculum is the Academic Success Program, which pairs first-year students with older students for tutoring and mentoring.

Gabriel Chavez, a 45-year-old 2L who came to NIU after a career in business, credits that program for helping him improve his GPA from a number he found unsatisfactory his first semester to a 3.4 and a spot on the dean's list in his third semester.

He met Rosato Perea during his first month on campus when he walked into her office without an appointment to introduce himself.

"Her primary focus is that we as students have the right tools to go into the legal profession and do well," Chavez said. "As a 3L, he's a big help. He's the one who's always there for me when I need him."

While it took time for Standish to see Rosato Perea's commitment as noteworthy, professor Lawrence Schlam knew right away.

"I've served under 10 deans," Schlam said. "In 30 years, I've never seen a dean work that hard, have so many creative ideas and just make an effort to raise us up to a good, competitive law school."

Schlam immediately appreciated her enthusiasm for the job, but he had no idea the extent to which that enthusiasm would run.

That changed when he received the first of a running string of 3 a.m. e-mails about initiatives and programming.

"It takes a certain kind of leadership to be so focused and devoted to the law school as to be thinking about what needs to happen literally night and day," Schlam said. "That's very impressive."

**Clinical expansion**
Like all law schools, clinical work is a priority at NIU.

The school has doubled its clinical slate since Rosato Perea took over—joining the Civil Justice Clinic and Juvenile Justice Clinic are the Foreclosure Mediation Clinic, which opened in August, and the Health Advocacy Clinic, which is expected to begin taking clients next month, said Anita Ortiz Maddali, the school's director of clinics.

While many law schools house clinics on campus, NIU's are in nearby towns—two in Rockford and now two in Aurora.

Though Rosato Perea views the university's single campus as one of its draws, having clinics spread throughout the state is appealing, as they send students into communities to help.

"One of the things that I did initially was I had a lot of meetings throughout the community trying to assess community needs," said Maddali, who was hired in 2011. "I surveyed students to find out what kind of clinical programs they were interested in with the idea that we would start one additional clinic."

During Maddali's trips through the region around DeKalb, she found two sites she thought were ripe for clinics—the Hesed House homeless shelter and the nonprofit health center Aunt Martha's, both in Aurora.

As it happened, the executive director of Hesed House at the time was Ryan J. Dowd, an NIU law grad.

It was fate.

For Standish, the 2L, the opportunity to work away from campus was one of the school's appeals.

"The biggest selling point was getting into the community (and) getting outside of the bubble I've been in for almost three years and hitting the pavement and being where the need is," she said.

"There was such a legal deficit in Aurora. And because I'm a resident of Aurora and invested in the community ... I would say the location made me want to do it even more."

**Go forth and prosper**

The other key to NIU's clinical success is opportunity. The math proves it.

With four clinics, eight externships and an enrollment goal of 100 to 115 students per year, the school can accommodate any student seeking an experiential learning opportunity.

That's important, because getting hands-on experience in law school is critical to competing in today's legal marketplace.

"I view law school as a three-year job search," Anderson said. "We are on those kids literally from day one to be out there doing things to make themselves more marketable."

The school is succeeding.

According to the American Bar Association, 78 of NIU's 91 graduates from 2013 were employed, including 57 working full-time, long-term jobs in which bar passage is required.

Those rates—85.7 percent employment and 62.6 percent full-time, long-term, bar-passage-required employment—put the school third in the state behind University of Chicago Law School and Northwestern University School of Law.

The 62.6 percent rate is also above the national average of 57.7 percent, while its percentage of students unemployed and seeking employment is the third-lowest in the state.

Statistics gathered by the National Association of Law Placement shows NIU's total employment numbers at 81.3 percent in 2011 and 89.8 percent in 2012.

Those percentages represent a recovery following the economic recession, which hit NIU particularly hard. From 2005 to 2007, the school's lowest employment rate as reported by NALP was 98.6. That total dropped each of the next two years, to 89.6 in 2008 and 74.7 in 2009.

"When the recession hit in '08-'09, things fell through the floor," Anderson said. "A significant portion of our students start in the public sector as assistant state's attorneys or assistant public defenders. Usually 20 to 25 percent. And in '08-'09, that sector shut off."

NIU's class of 2006 saw 15 of 109 students start as state prosecutors or public defenders. In 2009, that number was two out of 92.

Those numbers are on an upswing, Anderson said. In 2012, eight graduates out of 91 entered the public sector. In 2013, it was 17 out of 117.

Along with the administration's consistent emphasis on finding a job, it also aims to create opportunities through its alumni network. During Chavez's first year, for instance, he was searching for a lawyer who spoke Spanish to work at his wife's firm.

"I went to Greg and within a day I got a call from an NIU graduate in Chicago.," he said. "He's working for my wife's firm. Greg is that way. He's on top of it. He cares."

High-profile alumni are the same way.

"Three to six times a year, I get somebody who comes in," said Chicago 2nd Ward Ald. Robert W. Fioretti, an NIU law alumnus from the school's inaugural class in 1978.

"We talk about either their difficulties with the school, their apprehension about taking the bar. The various deans in all of their years have referred a lot of people to me."

Fioretti is one of the many alumni on-call to assist students through any means possible. As Anderson points out, every last advocate counts.

"What I keep stressing to the students is that there is no one perfect path or one perfect way to find a job," Anderson said. "They have to be creative and be persistent and just keep after it. And hopefully it pays off."