When Vincent F. Cornelius welcomes students from Northern Illinois University College of Law to the school's 12th annual minority reception Wednesday, he will be giving them an opportunity he did not have when he earned his J.D. at NIU in 1989.

"I had a sense that the minority alumni — and particularly, at that time, African-American alumni — were not really connected to one another, and to the law school, for that matter," Cornelius said. "I thought that we were foregoing an opportunity to network, to hire one another, to send business to one another, to assist other African-American students at NIU College of Law that would be in need of internships and externships and writing exams and taking the bar exam."

To reverse that current, Cornelius e-mailed his fellow black NIU alumni and organized a networking reception at a Near North Side bar in 1999.

"We had a great event and we all left there on a big high," he said.

That high lasted five years, until the group decided to revive the event in 2004. Attendance has grown steadily, with more than 100 guests for the past few years, including 125 last year and 140 expected on Wednesday.

Part of the growth is due to expanded interest. Part is due to an expanded guest list. The event went from black alumni to all minority alumni to all minority alumni and law students to anyone in the NIU law community to anyone.

"Now it's regularly attended by state bar leaders and city councilmen," Cornelius said. "It's taken a life of its own."

Cornelius' original intent of uniting alumni has turned into an opportunity for students to meet alumni. The school now buses students to the event from DeKalb.

"We've recruited students directly from that event because they see the community we have, not just a description of the community," said Dean Jennifer L. Rosato Perea. "They can feel it. They can see it. And they want to be a part of it."

Rosato Perea said recruiting is one of many ways the event impacts the law school — others include networking for career purposes or to find mentors.

"It's also a personal motivator. "It reminds me how important it is ... for me and Vince and others to keep bringing others along and to keep the commitment to diversity all year long," she said.

The notion of "bringing others along" is crucial for Rosato Perea.

"Students and lawyers who are different often feel like they do not belong in the law school or the legal profession," said Rosato Perea, whose hiring in 2009 made her the second Latina law school dean in the nation. "This is a celebration of belonging — of belonging to a community and being part of a community and a family."

The event will honor two members of that community, Cook County Circuit Judge Thaddeus L. Wilson and Melody Mitchell, NIU's director of alumni events and public relations.

"He is the kind of contributor and high achiever that we want our law students to know and hear about," Cornelius said of Wilson, who earned his J.D. at NIU in 1994. "We try to honor people who are using their law degrees to do good in the world. And I think Thad is a great example of that."

Mitchell, meanwhile, started her academic career as an undergraduate at NIU in 1989 and joined the law school staff in 2001.

"She exemplifies generosity, acceptance, empathy and building bridges among all of us," Rosato Perea said.

Like Rosato Perea, Mitchell views the event as an opportunity for NIU community members of different generations to connect. Cornelius agreed.

"The law students at NIU's College of Law keep coming," he said. "They continue to matriculate. They continue to graduate. They continue to enter our profession. We have a great opportunity here to influence the law students throughout the process I just described."