Huskies pick up the pace

BY Jack Silverstein
Law Bulletin Staff Writer

Dean Jennifer L. Rosato had a plan.

Hired by the Northern Illinois University College of Law in 2009 after helping found the Drexel University Earle Mack School of Law in Philadelphia in 2005, the new NIU dean had a vision for collaborations between the law school and other departments.

"Since I arrived at NIU about 4½ years ago, we've all been looking for ways for the law school to collaborate across campus," Rosato said. "One of the main collaborations we wanted to pursue was the notion of accelerated degree programs."

It was a notion Rosato successfully pursued at Drexel. Those collaborations, she said, were crucial in the development of Drexel's new law school, so when NIU hired her, she began forming partnerships on campus.

She started with the engineering school and is currently working on another with the business school.

And last week, she oversaw the launch of another partnership — the accelerated law degree program with the political science department.

"We have a lot of aspiring lawyers in political science," she said. "So that was a natural go-to department."

That sentiment is a two-way street.

"We've been coordinating a lot together on initiatives," said political science department Chair Matthew J. Streb. "The law school came to me and said 'Here's an idea we'd like to do.'

"They had the general idea, and then we had to sit down together to figure out how we would actually implement this," he said.

The process advanced quickly.

"It started moving through the colleges more on the political science end because they had more hoops to go through," Rosato said. "They did that early in the fall and we at the law school gave our approval probably about a month ago or so."
What they settled on was an integrated “3+3” program — three years of undergrad and three years of law school — that gives political science majors a head start on a law degree.

Unlike accelerated law programs that trim a year from the three years students spend working on their J.D., NIU’s program combines a political science major’s fourth year of undergrad with the first year of law school.

As a result, law students save a year’s worth of law school tuition — $21,398 for in-state students — rather than a year’s worth of undergraduate tuition, which stands at $11,916.

Tack on the average cost-of-living for a year of law school, and students could save upward of $35,000.

But there’s another financial wrinkle that the program’s creators are quick to point out.

“It’s not even the tuition savings,” Streb said. “It’s the fact that the student will be able to enter the work force a year earlier.”

This means trading a year of debt for a year of paychecks, Streb said, while also getting a one-year jump on promotions and pay raises. The impact on earnings, Streb said, could be substantial.

“We’re hoping that there are students who will say, ‘This program exists at Northern. This is an opportunity to save some money,’” he said.

To Rosato, Streb and David B. Gaebler, an associate law dean, the financial help to students also benefits the school. The plan is to recruit high school seniors specifically interested in earning both a political science degree and a law degree.

While current NIU students can sign up now, the program’s focus is incoming freshmen.

First, students will declare their political science major with an emphasis in politics. Next, they will hunker down on their major, completing all political science and general education courses in their first three years of school.

At the same time, they begin laying the groundwork for their law degree by taking the LSAT in February of their junior year.

With an LSAT score above the median of the prior year’s entering class at the law school as well as a minimum 3.25 GPA in their 90 hours of undergraduate work, students can then apply to the law school.

Once accepted, students will spend their fourth year of undergrad by taking their first year of law school classes, which will double as electives to fill out their final 30 hours of undergraduate work.

“There are a variety of different types of undergraduate institutions with a lot of different educational options,” Streb said. “We think this program will make us very competitive.”

With law school enrollment numbers down across the country, that competition is fiercer than ever.

And while both Rosato and Streb believe the program will boost enrollment, it was not created as a reaction to lower numbers.
“We were planning this before the downturn began,” Rosato said. “So it’s really serendipity that it will most importantly enhance the program at the university and the law school, and as a nice side effect will also create a pipeline into the law school.”

The idea of a faster law degree is hardly unique. IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Northwestern University School of Law and The John Marshall Law School all offer accelerated programs.

But to Rosato, the key to NIU’s offering is the fluidity of the integration and the tight relationship between department leaders.

“It’s not a partnership with another entity or a duel-degree program where students have to navigate different campuses,” Rosato said. “We have a sense that it will be a more integrated program than people might see at another law school.”

For Rosato, the accelerated law degree is yet another step in creating the kind of community she envisioned when she stepped onto the DeKalb campus four years ago.

“We’ve got students who are very enthusiastic and passionate about being at NIU and being in this community,” she said.

“They’re just going to continue at NIU and ... we’ll be able to benefit from the training they receive in the political science department and all of the skills and talents they brought in even as undergraduates to the university,” she said.

That training, she said, will turn the accelerated law degree into a de facto “honors program.”

“I think it will raise our profile as a law school,” she said.

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