New Western New England University School of Law Dean Focused On Learning Clinics

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Body

Eric J. Gouvin spent his first five years out of law school with a general practice law firm, where he learned the art of lawyering in the supportive environment of more experienced mentors.
He brings that coaching perspective to his new position as dean at Western New England University School of Law.

Gouvin graduated from Boston University School of Law in 1986. That summer, he started out as an associate at Bernstein, Shur, Sawyer & Nelson, a prestigious multi-service law firm based in Portland, ME. Gouvin was hired on later that year to handle transactional work in the corporate, banking and commercial law practices.
"I was brought along as an apprentice lawyer in a very supportive environment, something I think is fading from the legal profession now," he said. "To pass along the art of lawyering, not just 'here are the laws, here is what lawyers do, and why lawyers do it.'"
Gouvin developed that theory of legal education when he joined the faculty at Western New England University School of Law in 1991. He's served as a faculty member and administrator ever since.
"The best thing about teaching is the students," said Gouvin, who has taught classes relative to his scholarly interests: corporate, banking and entrepreneurship law, with a comparative or international lens.
"I have been here for 22 years and it's always remarkable to see kids come in from their [undergrad] college," he continued. "They are eager, but don't have much context. In three years, they really grow into a professional role, and it's gratifying to be part of that process."
In addition to his work as a law professor, Gouvin served as Associate Dean for External Affairs from 2003 to 2004. He spent five years as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs between 2004 and 2009. One of his most enjoyed tasks, which he continues to this day, is coaching the school's "Transactional Law Meet Team."
He said he highly enjoys coaching the team, which is essentially a moot court for business lawyers; Western New England banked the national championship title three years ago.
"They are assigned one side of a business deal and they have to interview the client and draft a document, sending the document to the other side to mark up," he said. "They then meet up and negotiate a deal - that's what is so great, is seeing them thrust themselves into the professional role and teach themselves."

Gouvin said it is critical for law students to learn by doing. Part of that process, he said, is to present students with opportunities to observe and participate in the practice of law. With that need for interactive, practical learning in mind, Gouvin founded an interdisciplinary project between the School of Law and the School of Business in 2002.

The project, called the Small Business Clinic, provides legal and business services on a pro bono basis to low-income entrepreneurs. The project also hosts educational events for the Springfield and Pioneer Valley community and established a resource center for small businesses.

The project has over the years been expanded to all academic units at Western New England, and is now called the Center for Innovation & Entrepreneurship, which Gouvin directs.

Gouvin said the Center should be a "model" for how the law school might work. In a prepared statement, he said: "In the Center, we forged ties to many community groups across the Pioneer Valley, involved expertise across the university campus, found opportunities for meaningful involvement by the bar and other professionals.

Most of all, he said, the center has provided a way to deliver a quality learning experience for the students. "I'd like to take that approach in the School of Law generally," he said.

In an interview, Gouvin said he plans to build upon collaborative approach between working lawyers in the region and students; which is what the Center has been all about.

"I bring in a banker, a practicing lawyer, or another professional to bring context to the students," said Gouvin. "It's a huge challenge to learn in the abstract - which is what I feel so many law schools push upon their students these days. If they have context, it sticks."

Gouvin said Western New England has always prided itself on being a "lawyers' law school." His vision moving forward is to raise the bar on its professional education by teaching students what lawyers do and why-and then get the students to apply fresh knowledge with real clients in real settings.

"We have six clinics and many externship opportunities, integrating the classroom and producing a better trained law school graduate - that's where we want to go," he said.

Selecting Gouvin as the new dean was a no-brainer, according to Dr. Jerry A. Hirsch, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Western New England.

"His fellow faculty members respect him as a scholar and a teacher," said Hirsch. "They were unanimous in choosing him."

"I'm delighted," he said. "He has a really great mix of the educational aspects of the law and the responsibilities of being an administrator."

Hirsch and Gouvin see challenges ahead.

"The pool of law school applicants is shrinking," said Gouvin, who added that some of the older faculty members have recently retired. He said this is a problem that all schools are seeing, and Western New England has lowered its acceptance number due to the shrinkage.

Hirsch agreed, saying the biggest challenge for all law schools currently is the "diminished interests" in the numbers of students seeking to go to law school and into the legal field.

"We used to bring in 150 first year law students, and this is the third year in a row where that number is closer to 75 to 80," he said.

Hirsch said many students are choosing a career other than law and not applying to law school because of the high level of student loan debt and lack of jobs requiring a law degree available to fresh-out-of-school graduates.

"The inevitable outcome is the need for law schools to downsize their operations to minimize lower bar passage rates, and many [schools] may disappear," Dr. Hirsch said.

Like the state of New York's consideration to offer a two-year law degree to solve these same issues, Gouvin said the option of a "master jurisprudence degree" is being discussed as a possibility for the future. "One of the things that will be ever-changing is the focus on the student experience," he said. "We will try some new things, some curricular changes - and while we've made some changes in the past couple of years, we've always aimed to be a student-friendly place...that's something that won't change."·

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