UC Berkeley School of Law dean steps down amid health issues

By Katie Lucia

Some say Christopher Edley Jr. brought UC Berkeley School of Law into the 21st century. In the nine years that Edley has headed the premier public law school as dean, he spearheaded efforts to renovate the institution's facilities, expanded and upgraded its faculty and established an emphasis on experiential learning.

Known as a transformative leader in legal education, Edley stepped down Monday due to health reasons. His appointment officially ends Dec. 31.

"He's really a national figure," said Marjorie M. Shultz, professor emeritus at UC Berkeley School of Law. "I think he has tremendous vision about the profession of law and law schools so I think he's been a very positive influence at Berkeley. I'm sorry to have him step down."

Many anticipated Edley would not continue as dean at the conclusion of his term next year. But his early departure was a surprise, faculty said, because many didn't know the extent of his health issues or that he had any. According to a statement issued by the school, Edley had surgery for prostate cancer earlier this year. When he learned he needed more treatment, Edley decided to prioritize his health.

He described his health problems as "more than worrisome, but much less than dire."

"Chris Edley has done a terrific job being at Berkeley," said Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of UC Irvine School of Law. "In every way he has just been a model to all of us who are deans."

Professors say Edley's progressive vision for the school caused waves among faculty, causing the school to lose several key professors, according to published reports.

"He totally shook things up," said Melissa Murray, a law professor at Berkeley. "He was the first external dean [in many decades]. ... For him there were no sacred cows."

Among the more radical changes he implemented was a push to create law clinics to provide students with hands on learning, Shultz said.

"Boalt was slow to adopt clinical programs and various kinds of learning through experience," she said. "It was pretty divided on this issue. I think he just established very quickly that we were going to expand those offerings, and once there was a clear leadership vision in that direction people who had spoken against it [stopped]."

Edley also recruited more diverse professors, expanding faculty by 40 percent and dropping the student to teacher ratio from 18:1 to 12:1. He created a vibrant junior faculty, Murray said, with new and exciting people.
He also led dramatic upgrades to the school. Under his direction the campus’s dated facilities were renovated and a new central building constructed to provide different kinds of classroom space, Murray said. The classrooms were overhauled and infused with technology.

"He was a brilliant dean with an extraordinary vision for public education at a time when public education was under siege," Murray said.

Like many public California law schools, Berkeley weathered unprecedented budget cuts. In the past five years, the University of California system has endured $900 million in cuts, according to the UC website.

Before he became Berkeley’s dean, Edley was a professor at Harvard Law School and served as an advisor to presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.

"Over these years I suppose there may have been a few moments when I regretted coming to Boalt," Edley wrote in a letter to faculty and staff. "But I can't seem to remember a single one."

Professor Gillian Lester will serve as acting dean while the law school searches for a permanent replacement.

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