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Law school deans find support for innovation

By Lyle Moran

Andrew T. Guzman has been dean at USC Gould School of Law since the summer, but under his leadership the institution is already pursuing a variety of ambitious initiatives.

Among them are developing a global network of collaborating law schools and creating a master's degree program for non-lawyers who want to learn legal tools useful in business.

University leaders have been strong supporters of those new efforts and others, said Guzman.

"If we at the law school want to do something creative or innovative, the first instinct is not to shut it down," he said. "It is just the opposite."

Educators like Guzman say that despite the many challenges facing legal education, law school deans have more opportunity than ever to pursue wide-scale reforms and new programs at their schools.

Others agreed that problems such as declining enrollment and reduced budgets, which have prompted heavy turnover in their ranks, have altered the role of a dean in ways that have provided additional fulfillment.

Frank H. Wu, outgoing dean and chancellor of UC Hastings College of the Law, said advocates for legal education reform like himself have in some ways benefited from a change in the public discourse about law schools.

A decade ago, applicants for a law school dean position could not share their desire to completely shake a school up if they wanted to get a job, because that was not a mainstream viewpoint, he said.

Now, a day doesn't go by where someone, ranging from an American Bar Association official to President Obama, doesn't say legal education needs to be fixed, said Wu.

"You can actually show up and say, 'We can do this differently,' and people will take you seriously," Wu said. "That was not true in the past. It is a huge opportunity."

Wu has made the most of it.



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Andrew T. Guzman, the new dean of USC Gould School of Law, is pursuing a variety of ambitious initiatives, including a master's degree program for non-lawyers and a global network of collaborating law schools.

During his tenure that began in 2009, UC Hastings has launched a fellowship program that allows students in their third year to work at a government agency or nonprofit organization and return for a year after graduation as part of a paid fellowship at the same site.

The goals of the Lawyers for America initiative include improving access to justice and enhancing the practice skills of new lawyers.

UC Hastings has also partnered with UC Santa Cruz to offer a "3+3" program enabling students to complete a bachelor's degree and law degree at the two institutions in six years rather than seven.

Victor J. Gold, who served as dean of Loyola Law School from 2009 until earlier this year, agreed that law school leaders have greater support for reforms and must pursue them because of financial realities.

"You can't just be complacent and do things the way they have always been done," he said.

Like other deans in the state, Gold cut the size of the annual incoming class at Loyola because he did not want to enroll more students than the job market could accommodate.

But he cautioned that cutbacks or major overhauls of programs often cannot be completed as quickly as desired, especially at institutions where tenured faculty and other interested parties are accustomed to the school operating a certain way.

"As dean, you are not driving a Ferrari, you are steering an oil tanker," Gold said. "It is not easy to change direction quickly."

Clear communication is essential when making reforms such as downsizing the workforce, which many schools have had to do in recent years because of financial realities, said Susan Westerberg Prager, dean and CEO of Southwestern Law School.

She said she tries to find the right balance between being transparent while also sharing the information in a way that won't destabilize the institution and its employees.

"I think it is very important the communication always make clear that preserving the health and the purposes of the institution were at the center of why change had to occur," Prager said.

Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of the UC Irvine School of Law, said deans also must keep their schools focused on their vision to navigate times of change.

Since the school opened to students in 2009, UC Irvine has continued to increase the number of students it admits and the size of its faculty even as tuition has been frozen at UC law schools.

"We have a vision for a school in terms of a strong emphasis on experiential learning and public service," Chemerinsky said. "None of the challenges have caused us to lessen those commitments or how we achieve them."

Current and former deans said the financial challenges confronting law schools have led to the role of a dean changing dramatically from that of primarily an academic administrator, to more of a businessperson.

Some have experienced spin-off benefits due to the shift.

Kevin R. Johnson, dean of UC Davis School of Law since 2008, said he has had to spend more time focused on fundraising in recent years.

As a result, he has traveled much more to speak to alumni and others about the school, a task he has welcomed.

"One of the most enjoyable parts of the job is talking about a school you are proud of," said Johnson, who has held his role at UC Davis longer than any other current dean in the state.

Prager, who previously was dean at UCLA School of Law from 1982 to 1998, said she has found great joy in interacting with the types of students attending Southwestern Law School today.

Because legal education has received substantial negative press, the students deciding to enroll have a willingness to go against the grain and are even more determined to succeed, she said.

"The dominant tone is of one of purposefulness, initiative and wanting to do the best they can," Prager said. "That is really a pleasure."

But the very real challenges have also prompted a number of law school deans in California and nationwide to step aside to teach or pursue other opportunities.

After more than 5 years as dean at UC Hastings, Wu announced in November he would be stepping down in January even though he had been reappointed to a second term lasting until 2020.

Wu, who will teach again, plans to keep advocating for changes to legal education.

But he said the time had come to give someone else the chance to lead UC Hastings in a climate where law schools deans can pursue innovation with support.

"I've set the stage," Wu said. "There are many, many other structural reforms that have to be made."

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