



Erwin Chemerinsky: A milestone in creating very special law school

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On June 6, the American Bar Association Council on Legal Education granted full accreditation to the UC Irvine School of Law. Although it was expected, it also was not something to be taken for granted. Many area law schools have struggled through this process. Receiving full accreditation easily, and at the earliest possible time, is a reflection of what we have achieved. It also is an occasion for reflecting on this amazing experience of creating a new law school.

In fall 2006, the Regents of the University of California approved the creation of a law school at UCI. It was the culmination of 20 years of efforts by a group of dedicated community leaders, including Joe Dunn, Andrew Guilford, Thomas Malcolm, Mark Robinson and James Irvine Swinden. It could not have happened without the tireless work of Executive Vice Chancellor Michael Gottfredson. It was Chancellor Michael Drake who ultimately persuaded the Regents and shepherded the proposal through the approval processes.

A dean search was conducted in the spring and summer of 2007, and I accepted the position of founding dean in early September 2007. I was a professor at Duke Law School at the time and spent that year, while teaching at Duke, recruiting founding faculty and senior administrators for UCI Law School. Once a week, from mid-September through mid-March, I flew from North Carolina to Orange County.

From the outset, I identified two goals for the new school, and they have guided us ever since. First, we aspired to be, from the beginning, one of the top law schools in the country by every measure. We began by hiring 10 founding faculty members, all of whom were very experienced and had taught at top-20 law schools. We have expanded the faculty so that, as of July 1, we will have 43 full-time faculty, and we have continued to hire at only the highest level.

A study published last year by some professors at St. Thomas Law School ranked our faculty seventh in the country in scholarly impact, after Yale, Harvard, Chicago, Stanford, NYU and Columbia. It is a wonderful tribute to the talent and hard work of our faculty.

Each year, our students have had qualifications comparable to those of top-20 law schools. We have gradually expanded, from 60 students in the inaugural class that began in 2009, to 83, 89, 119 and 126 students in successive years.

A reflection of the quality of our students is a study published by a Pepperdine professor in May 2014 that ranked us third in the country in placing our students in prestigious judicial clerkships after graduation; we were behind Yale and Stanford and just ahead of Harvard.

Most of all, the quality of the UCI Law School is a reflection of the commitment of Chancellor Drake and Provosts Michael Gottfredson, Sue Bryant and Howard Gillman. We also could not have achieved our goals without the strong commitment of those in the community who have supported us in every way.

But I also repeatedly have said that, if we simply replicate other law schools, we will have failed. The second part of my vision is that I want us to do the best possible job of preparing students for the practice of law at the highest levels of the profession. Most lawyers would say, as I do, that they did not graduate from law school ready to practice law. We can and must do better.

A centerpiece of our effort is that every student must participate in a legal clinic in order to graduate. Each student, under the supervision of a faculty member, represents clients and handles all aspects of their legal work. This academic year, students could choose to focus on appellate litigation, consumer law, community economic development, domestic violence law, environmental law, immigrants rights or international justice. In the coming academic year, we will add an intellectual property clinic.

We have devised an innovative curriculum that emphasizes preparing students to be lawyers. New courses have been created and skills training has been incorporated into traditional classes.

From the outset, we have stressed public service. I am especially proud that, last year, 92 percent of our students did pro bono work, and they averaged more than 80 hours each of pro bono work. In this way, and through our clinics, we are also helping to serve the unmet legal needs of our Orange County community.

Full accreditation from the ABA is an important milestone in creating a very special law school. In the next five years, we will expand to full size and, hopefully, construct a new law school building on campus. At every step, our goal is to make our campus, our community and our society better. I am deeply grateful to all who have helped us and are helping us in creating a very special law school.

Erwin Chemerinsky is the dean of the UCI School of Law.