



Who's Leading America's Law Schools?

BY JONATHAN T. WEISBERG

Photographs by (from left) Lloyd DeGrane; University of Memphis
School of Law; Columbia Law School; Peter Olsen; David Leifer;
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A higher percentage of Yale Law School graduates become law teachers than graduates of any other law school, and about thirty YLS alumni are currently law school deans. The Law Report spoke with six of them about the very different challenges they face and the dreams they share for themselves, their students, and their schools.

from left to right

Saul Levmore '80 University of Chicago Law School

James R. Smoot '74 University of Memphis School of Law

David Michael Schizer '93 Columbia Law School

Joan G. Wexler '74 Brooklyn Law School

Emily A. Spieler '73 Northeastern University School of Law

Leonard P. Strickman '66 Florida International University College of Law

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When Leonard Strickman took on the role of dean at FIU College of Law, he had no students, no faculty, no administrators, and no building. "I had an office without secretarial help for at least a month on the top floor of the university library," he recalls. "I answered my own telephone and started to get myself organized."

The College of Law was authorized by the Florida legislature in 2000 to provide a public law school in the Miami area. Strickman came on board as founding dean in 2001. He had obvious qualifications for the task of constructing a school out of nothing: He had been dean at two other law schools and had also spent six years on the ABA's accreditation committee.

Strickman quickly hired several senior administrators and began recruiting a faculty. "That was one of the most exciting tasks; we have been able to recruit outstanding people from all over the country," he says. The first classes were held in the fall of 2002, but the entire school was crammed into renovated space in the university library while Strickman oversaw the construction of a new building, due to open in 2006.

Strickman also had to push the school along the accreditation track, attaining provisional accreditation in the shortest possible time. "I do anticipate within the next two years we will be fully accredited by the ABA." But he adds, "We want to be better than simply an accreditable school. The goals have always been higher."

Even before he had a classroom or a student body, Strickman had some idea what the new school would look like. "Part of that springs from our location in Miami," says Strickman. "It was a given that we were going to be diverse.... Miami is one of the most international cities in the United States... and the gateway to so much of Latin America."

Starting from scratch allowed Strickman to instill an international perspective in every aspect of the school. "We're the only law school in the country right now that has a required first-year course called Introduction to International and Comparative Law. Also, we're the only law school that requires at least a few hours of transnational exposure in every domestic law class." Furthermore, because internationalism was a "founding principle" of the school, all the faculty who signed on had an interest in the subject. Strickman has also built in a commitment to public service, with a mandatory pro bono community service program.

"We want our students to believe that their professional role requires them to serve the public interest."

One drawback to starting from scratch: no graduates. "My biggest concern as we speak is raising enough money to furnish the building that we barely have enough money to complete...and that is a particular challenge when you have no alumni."

Strickman has taken the school from zero students to about 330, and he has plans for even more growth. "Starting next year, when we've got a lot more space, we'll start to double our first-year class and we'll eventually grow to a law school of more than 600 students."

Joan G. Wexler '74***Brooklyn Law School***

Joan Wexler has been dean at Brooklyn Law School for more than a decade, but she still thinks of herself as a short-timer by Brooklyn standards. "The law school is 104 years old, and I'm the seventh dean. Lasting a long time in the deanship here is not unusual," she says.

As short or as long as her term may seem, Wexler has overseen tremendous changes at the school. The quality of the students as measured by their incoming grades and test scores has improved. She has hired a new generation of faculty and is currently in the midst of another hiring push. She renovated the existing law school building and purchased two buildings as student residences. In August 2005, the law school completed construction on a brand-new twenty-two-story residence hall, named Feil Hall. "It's a magnificent building designed by the dean of the Yale School of Architecture, Robert A. M. Stern. It has apartments for students, a conference center, and a café named Geraldo's after our illustrious alum Geraldo Rivera."

With Feil Hall, BLS has contributed a piece to the Brooklyn skyline. Similarly, the school has benefited from the richness of its neighborhood. "Downtown Brooklyn is having a renaissance," says Wexler. "Now we have nine residential buildings. Everybody wants to be in Brooklyn."

BLS is an independent law school, which means that Wexler's role as dean is a little different from that at most other law schools. "I am the dean and the president. I report directly to the board of trustees and there is no bureaucracy above me. I not only do the things that deans do in a university setting, but I'm in charge of the operation in a way that's very different. I not only develop the budget, I am responsible for the budget. I'm also the person who's the

bottom-line person if they've forgotten to clear the snow in front of the buildings."

Wexler continues, "The good part is your money is your own, and the bad part is that's it. There isn't any other deep pocket. When there's a disaster, or an emergency, or whatever, you're really on your own."

With her long term in office and final responsibility for every aspect of the school, Wexler is a sort of steward of the school—sensitive to the school's history and traditions, and how that past shapes the Brooklyn Law School of today. "When it started in 1901, the Brooklyn Bridge had been recently completed, Brooklyn was a geographical expanse teeming with immigrants—Jews, Italians, Irish—and American blacks. Those people, including women, were denied the opportunity to go elsewhere in great numbers, in part because of money, but in large part because of quotas. And Brooklyn Law School welcomed them." She says that all law schools have since embraced diversity. "In fact, our student body now looks very much like everyone's student body. But that nugget from our background is still there, and that's a little bit of who we are."

As she pushes into her second decade as dean, Wexler has no plans to slow down. "I think what a law school needs to do is build on its traditions. Not to put aside its history, but to be thinking constantly about how to improve and move forward."

Saul Levmore '80
University of Chicago Law School

At 6:38 a.m. on October 19, 2005, Saul Levmore finished writing a 600-word commentary arguing that hedge funds shouldn't be restricted only to wealthy investors and posted it to the University of Chicago Law School's new Faculty Blog. "We're very proud of the blog," he said later that day. "I think of myself as a faculty member who's taking a short-term adventure. And an interesting part of it is thinking about how new technology will change ideas and the world of the university in the future.... More and more we read scholarship online, so I think this is the logical next step."

Levmore is also spearheading a project called Chicago Policy Initiatives, loosely modeled on the Chicago Jury Project, a wide-ranging study of the jury conducted in the 1950s. "The idea is to get a whole bunch

of students and faculty interested in a social problem and then work on it for a relatively short period of time, like two years, and then come out with a proposal for the country." Initiatives so far have looked at revamping teenage foster care and the politicization of the judiciary. Levmore expects that the initiatives will generate draft legislation, white papers, and articles.

Levmore ties these two projects together by describing them as efforts to expand the ways the law school communicates with the general public. "Our students coming here love ideas. They sit around at lunch and talk about ideas. It's a place that attracts people like that. And there are people like that out in the world and they can find their way to our lunchroom, so to speak, through this technology."

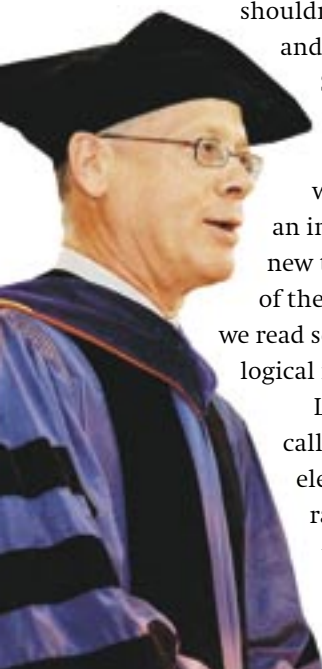
Levmore says that a devotion to ideas—he calls it "intellectual intensity and analytic rigor"—is foundational to the character of his school. But, he adds that maintaining this

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quality doesn't take much effort from the dean. "Self-selection is what does it," he says. He tries to present the experience of being a student or professor at Chicago honestly. "People who don't like to be interrupted, or people who like long monologues, they wouldn't like being on the faculty or being students here. And I think they tend not to come."

However, Levmore says he does strive to instill a lifelong taste for ideas and appreciation for learning about them in his students. He says a law school education should have a "forty-year horizon and not a three-year horizon." He does this through his control over the way classes are taught, extracurricular programs, and the dean's ultimate discretionary weapon: "when and where you give out free food."

Levmore had been teaching at Chicago for three years before he became dean in 2001. He studies and writes primarily about torts and corporate law, but since becoming dean, he's devoted a lot of energy to developing projects outside his own interests. "If somebody had said to me in advance, 'Why don't you go be dean of a major law school? You will work on clinical programs, public interest projects, and architecture.' I would have said, 'Don't be ridiculous.'... But you respond to the needs you perceive when you take the job, and that's been part of the adventure."



Emily A. Spieler '73

Northeastern University School of Law

"I'm very interested in the role of law schools in thinking of how to train lawyers who...will go out into the fray and who will understand issues of social relevancy," says Emily Spieler.

Spieler says that Northeastern students start discussing the real-life implications of what they're learning from their first days in law school. In the spring of their first year, they provide research to community organizations. "They are actually out in the community interviewing immigrants, or low-wage workers, or researching prisoner reentry, low-cost housing," says Spieler. "It creates the beginnings of an understanding of the intersections of law and society that are different from studying in the classroom."

According to Spieler, Northeastern is best known for its Cooperative Legal Education Program, which also thrusts students into the field. After a traditional first year, Northeastern students have eight quarters ahead of them, and they go out to work for four of those quarters and take classes for the other four. Instead of having only two summers to intern, Northeastern students essentially get to try four different jobs. They can work at a firm, an NGO, a federal court, and a prosecutor's office. "By the time they're toward the end of their third year, they have an amazingly sophisticated understanding of what they want to do," says Spieler.

The Co-op Program creates administrative challenges. "Essentially we get eight hundred jobs a year for people," says Spieler. They also have to keep in mind that half of the students are off campus in any given quarter when scheduling classes. "It creates all sorts of pressure on the available resources. But I think it's worth it."

Spieler argues that the best way to teach students to value social justice is through this sort of hands-on experience. "I think that clinical education when done well teaches people very deeply about issues of social justice, in part because you end up having individual relationships with people who are very different from you." She describes a recent reunion of Northeastern's prisoners' rights clinics. "Almost all of the alumni talked about 'how I learned what it was like in prison, what it felt like to be that person.' And that's how law schools best teach these issues—not through didactic podium courses."

Spieler says she has taken an unconventional path to a law school deanship. After law school she practiced law with a "small, socially activist women's law firm.... I never imagined

myself going into the academy," she says. She next went to the coal fields of West Virginia, where she eventually became commissioner of West Virginia's Workers' Compensation Fund and later joined the faculty at West Virginia University College of Law. She took the deanship at Northeastern in 2002. Perhaps an unconventional background is just right for the head of an unconventional school. "The key is having experience both in and outside of the academy to be an effective dean," she says.

As one example of how unconventional being dean of Northeastern is, Spieler says that when she meets alumni, the first thing she asks them for is not money but Co-op jobs for her students.

James R. Smoot '74

University of Memphis School of Law

Jim Smoot might sometimes wonder if he's a lawyer or a real estate magnate since taking over as dean at Memphis. "I was really brought in as dean to devote most of my attention to moving the law school into a new building," he says. Smoot estimates that he spends more than seventy percent of his time on planning and fundraising for the new building.

Smoot argues that good teaching needs a good physical plant, and the law school's current building is having a negative impact on the quality of education at the school. "It's decrepit. It has classrooms with awful sightlines, classrooms that are not particularly big but where we have to use a dozen microphones.... Think of three bowling lanes, or a bowling alley, where the vertical dimensions of the ceiling are more than the side-to-side dimensions." Indeed, when the law school did a study of other law schools' physical plants, they found that Memphis was using fifty-five percent of the normal square footage per student.

Supporting classroom education is particularly important at Memphis. "We have one of the heaviest and largest curriculums in the country," says Smoot. The intense curriculum scares off students who aren't willing to work hard during law school, and, says Smoot, "there's an expectation in the classroom, where I was for years and years, that you will give F's." But this tough-love teaching means that Memphis consistently has the best bar pass and job placement rates in Tennessee.

Smoot has not only overseen the technical planning for a new building, working with architects and builders, but he's taken on the political effort. "This is a state with no income tax that prides itself on being a low-tax state, and money for this kind of project is very hard to come by," he says. "I'm in

numerous conversations with the governor, the legislative delegations, the mayor, city council, county commission, various developmental agencies, developers, bankers, lawyers.”

Smoot located a site for the new building in the Memphis business district. It will be on the Mississippi River and connect with a 140-year-old former courthouse. “We finally got the ‘powers that be’ motivated and aligned,” says Smoot. They are moving forward on final plans, looking forward to a proposed opening in 2009. “It’ll be an extraordinary building,” says Smoot. “It’ll be the equal of just about any.”

But what will Smoot do when his *raison d’être* as a dean is complete? “This is the best job I’ve ever had. My wife—we’ve been married since ’69—tells me that I’m more energized and enthusiastic than she can ever remember,” says Smoot. “I’m not sure I’d be able to say that, though, if the job consisted only of the normal things that go along with being a dean without the overarching crisis we’re dealing with now. I’m not sure that’d be very interesting to me. But who knows?”

David Michael Schizer ’93
Columbia Law School

When David Schizer became dean of Columbia in 2004, he was thirty-five years old and the youngest dean in Columbia’s history. He had been teaching there since 1998, but when the previous dean stepped down and some of his friends on the faculty broached the idea of his becoming dean, Schizer recalls, “I said, ‘You mean someday,’ and they said, ‘No, we mean now.’ And it took a little time for me to get used to the idea.”

Schizer was conscious of the traditions of the school. For example, Schizer says that Columbia has always had strong international programs. “We started admitting foreign graduate students here in the 1880s, which is long before everybody else, and before most of the other law schools were even founded.” One of his first major initiatives drew on two of the school’s traditional strengths by creating an international business law program. “Some of the most important questions in business law right now relate to globalization and how

we think about the institutions that are necessary to promote economic growth. It’s really the cutting edge right now and we’re well positioned to take advantage of it.”

But Schizer constructs his initiative with one more Columbia tradition in mind. “This is a law school that aspires to be intellectual and practical at the same time.... If you study business law here, for example, you’re going to get a very hefty dose of economics. But, at the same time we want our students to ask, ‘That’s fine in theory, but how does it actually work on the ground?’”

Schizer studied tax law before becoming dean, and he sees something of this pragmatic bent in his scholarship. “A significant chunk of my scholarship was to think about how an uncontroversial goal might be translated into action, and some of the pitfalls that people face, and the unexpected opportunities that they face. And so, really, my scholarship was in a way about getting things done, and that’s what deans are supposed to do. It also doesn’t hurt if I can give tax advice to the people I’m hiring.”

Schizer taught a course on professionalism this year, and says it’s important for law schools to get students to think about legal ethics and their role in society. “It’s realistic for the first time to think that we could have people living in freedom and prosperity all over the globe. And in order for that to happen, you need legal institutions and you need lawyers.”

Schizer says that he loves the job of dean at least nine days out of ten, even though he misses having the time for scholarship. He didn’t write a paper in his first year and has cut his teaching load

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David Michael Schizer

significantly. But he’s learned to take control of his schedule to clear time for pressing projects. And he has always made time for the most important things: “I have two little girls, and I love spending time with them. I work very hard to make sure that I still do.” ♣

