

Leading the

Dean Heather K. Gerken reflects on her first decanal term, a vision for legal education, and plans for the future.

Over the past five years, Dean Heather K. Gerken has strengthened Yale Law School's tradition of academic excellence, fortified support for the student body, and launched innovative new programming while navigating an unprecedented pandemic. On Jan. 19, 2022, Yale University President Peter Salovey reappointed Gerken to a second five-year term, noting her record of accomplishments and vision for the future.

"Members of the YLS community remarked on Dean Gerken's dedication to the mission of the School, her record of building new innovative programs, her advocacy for scholarly and clinical work, and the inspiring passion that she brings every day to her job," said Salovey.

"She has already accomplished an ambitious agenda in her first term, and I am confident that the Law School will continue to benefit tremendously from her vision, talent, and energy in the years ahead."

Gerken, the Sol & Lillian Goldman Professor of Law, is an acclaimed teacher and one of the country's leading experts on constitutional law and election law. She became Dean in 2017 and is the first woman to serve in the role. Her next five-year term began on July 1, 2022. The *Yale Law Report* asked Dean Gerken to reflect on her first term and look ahead to what comes next.

Law School



Photo by Harold Shapiro

Admitted the five most diverse classes in YLS history



In the class of 2024, 54% are students of color, 28% are first-generation professionals, and 17% are first-generation college students.

Yale Law Report As you look back on your first term, what accomplishments are the most meaningful to you? What were the greatest challenges?

Heather K. Gerken The Law School has a restless gene, and so do I. We never rest on our laurels. Instead, we are always pushing forward with new ideas, new initiatives, and new ways to live up to our values. That energy fuels my work as Dean and makes the job rewarding. The past five years have been a tremendous period of change at the Law School as we've built upon our best traditions while adapting for the future. I'm proud that we have admitted the five most diverse classes in our history during my first term, tripled the number of veterans enrolled at Yale Law School, and worked to ensure that all of our students have access to the remarkable educational opportunities the Law School offers. Through scholarly research, clinics, and centers, our faculty and students have generated groundbreaking ideas and made a tremendous difference in communities around the world.

This last year has been particularly inspiring. Despite being stalled by the pandemic, we are moving forward on two remarkable new initiatives. We just expanded a financial aid model that was already best-in-class, announcing full-tuition scholarships for our

highest-need students in February. A few months earlier, we launched The Tsai Leadership Program, which is aimed at building a curriculum for the next century. I've been overwhelmed by the level of alumni support for these programs. Our graduates understand in their bones the importance of training the next generation to lead us forward, and they want to ensure this cherished intellectual experience is accessible to all.

Like all institutions, we've also faced challenges over the last few years. The hardest has been navigating the ever-changing conditions from COVID-19. The virus turned our entire way of life on its head. Still, it has been incredible to watch this community come together to preserve our intellectual life and reinvent our time-honored traditions. If anything, this experience has made us value our core model — living and learning under one roof — even more than before.

We've also dealt with hard and complicated questions that every academic institution in the country is facing — those centered on free speech, equality, and the brutally divisive forces of polarization. Because this is a storied institution that looms large in the public imagination, when tough issues arise we often find ourselves working through them under a bright spotlight. It is all too easy to be buffeted and lose focus on the core mission. My job as Dean,

Tripled the number of veterans enrolled

Dean Gerken with student veterans in November 2021



Launched The Tsai Leadership Program

Dean Gerken celebrated the launch of The Tsai Leadership Program with a gala event in April 2022.



however, is straightforward — to listen to members of the community, to reflect on whether course corrections are needed, and to ensure we hew to our values. We teach and learn through intimate, iterative conversations within our community. Those vital discussions have been happening and continue to take place here, and we will be the better for it. As painful as they are, these difficult moments are opportunities for us to learn and grow; I certainly do. What always centers me during tough moments is the simplicity and deep magic of our mission — teaching, research, and service.

The Law School recently launched The Tsai Leadership Program and The Hurst Horizon Scholarship Program. How significant are these programs, and how do they fit together?

These programs are so significant that I would have felt lucky to serve as Dean when just one of them was launched, let alone to launch both in a single year. I am eternally grateful to our alumni, who have helped these programs move from a twinkle in our eye to reality in a remarkably short time.

The Tsai Leadership Program grew from the simple act of listening — listening to our alumni talk about why Yale Law School mattered to them and what they wish they'd learned outside of a traditional legal education. The YLS degree has always been a thinking degree, training extraordinarily bright students to question everything and to build their conceptual and analytic skills. This program enables us to design a new curriculum for the future, offer professional training outside of the curriculum, and bring in mentors-in-residence to advise students on the many paths available to them. As part of the program, students can also engage with two specialized centers — the Chae Initiative in Private Sector Leadership and the Ludwig Program in Public Sector Leadership. While every student will have access to all of the offerings made available by The Tsai Leadership Program, I suspect that the Chae Initiative and Ludwig Program will be especially attractive to those I call our “lawyers writ large,” the students who use their Yale Law School degree to pursue a nontraditional path in the business, policy, or nonprofit

world. I also view the program as critical infrastructure for our first-geners, providing students with tailored career advice and access to the Law School’s powerful networks. I hope our alumni will help light up the career paths they carved and reach out their hands to pull our students into their professional worlds.

The Hurst Horizon Scholarship also came from listening — listening to the increasingly diverse group of students in our midst. We have a premier financial aid program, one that provides the lowest debt load among our peers, extraordinary support for public interest work, and loan forgiveness for those who need it, all the while supporting a remarkable 77% of our student body. But when we listened to our students with the highest financial need — especially the many students who come from families below the poverty line — we learned that the loans that are part of need-based financial aid packages at every law school weighed heavily on them and their families.

Launched the Hurst Horizon Scholarship Program

Yale Law School to Cover Full Tuition and Fees for Lowest-Income Students

Dean Heather Gerken urges other law schools to direct more of their financial aid to need-based scholarships



Yale Law's new Hurst Horizon Scholarship will go to students whose families live below the federal poverty line.

By [Melissa Korn](#) [Follow](#) and [Sara Randazzo](#) [Follow](#) / Photographs by [Tim Tai](#) for *The Wall Street Journal*
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Dean Gerken was interviewed by *The Wall Street Journal* about the Soledad '92 and Robert Hurst Horizon Scholarship Program in February. Learn more about the program on page 36 and the founding donors on page 38.

Established the Safety Net Fund and bolstered need-based financial aid



During the pandemic, Dean Gerken continued her custom of calling each new admitted student and meeting with each small group. She also established the Joy Fund to sponsor events for students and staff to foster community: from food trucks to book groups. One of Dean Gerken's fundraising priorities has been for student support, including establishing a Safety Net Fund and bolstering financial aid.

That is why we partnered with our alumni to create the Hurst Horizon Scholarship Program, which erases tuition for our J.D. students with the highest need, freeing them from financial worry during law school and ensuring they can live out their dreams. The day that we let these 1Ls and 2Ls know that their tuition would be on us next year was extraordinarily moving. I cannot tell you what it has meant to hear about the impact this program will have on the lives of our students who will be among the first cohort of recipients.

It's my hope that these new scholarships will inspire a shift in legal education so that more law schools invest in need-based scholarships instead of merit-based support, putting financial aid in the hands of those who need it most. The launch of The Tsai Leadership Program and the Hurst Horizon Scholarship Program create an extraordinary moment for us to lead legal education while cementing our commitment to innovation, access, and equity — values that sit at the heart of this institution.

Increased faculty diversity



Miriam Gohara, who received tenure in July, teaches one of her clinics in March 2022. A core priority for Dean Gerken has been diversifying the faculty. Since the beginning of 2017, the Law School has hired seven new tenure or tenure-track academic and clinical faculty. Of these seven, five come from backgrounds that are underrepresented on the faculty, including women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and first-generation professionals.



What are the most interesting trends you have seen in legal education, and what do you hope to see more of in the future?

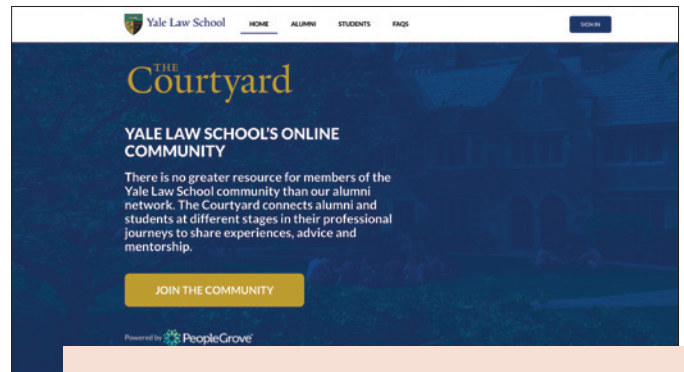
Yale Law School has always led the way forward in legal education, and I hope that has been true during my deanship as well. Diversifying our student body and faculty has been a top priority for me, and I am glad to see so many other law schools following our lead in recent years. What's important is that we haven't just ushered in the five most diverse classes in our history; we've built out the educational infrastructure that they need to thrive. A large number of our students come from families whose incomes fall below the poverty line or are the first in their family to go to college or professional/graduate school. These are some of the most entrepreneurial students on the planet. But they come to us without networks and with a different set of financial needs than their peers. It is my hope that law schools around the country will do more to invest in students so that the next generations of lawyers and leaders reflect the remarkable diversity of the world around us.

I've also spoken frequently about how law schools can navigate the so-called "theory/practice divide." As I outlined in a 2019 *Harvard Law Review* article, there has long been a debate about how best to educate law students. Many people think there is a giant gap between academic work and lawyering. But our faculty have always resisted this divide. An extraordinary number of our nonclinical faculty run clinics or do work out in the world. So, too, our clinicians take part in the intellectual life of the school. For instance, our most recently tenured clinician is working on a research project with an analytic philosopher. Where else does that happen? We have always been — and will always be — the premier theory school in the country, a place inhabited by scholarly giants and a place for our students to luxuriate in ideas. It's wonderful to see that we have become just as ambitious on the practice side. It's this unique model that makes this place incredibly special.

What is your vision for your next term?

When I began as Dean, I wrote to President Salovey that I had eight goals in mind but would be happy to achieve just two or three of

them over the course of my deanship. At the end of my first five years, I'm proud to say that we've achieved seven of those goals and are hard at work on the eighth. That doesn't mean the mission is complete, however—far from it. Coming back from COVID-19 doesn't simply mean teaching without masks. Like every academic institution, we must rebuild our academic community, learn from the last two years, and repair ties that have been frayed. We are still in the early stages of building The Tsai Leadership Program, and it will require attention and care to ensure the program lives up to the best traditions of this institution. I also cannot wait to expand the Hurst Horizon Scholarship Program. There are many students here whose families come from just above the poverty line, and I hope with the support of our alumni we can increase the number of students who will benefit from these life-changing scholarships going forward. I also am focused on hiring new faculty who will continue to enrich our intellectual environment and offer new perspectives across a range of subjects. This is a moment to rejuvenate our faculty and hire the next generation of great scholars. This School's potential is limitless, especially with our alumni in our corner. It's an honor to serve in this role for a second term, and I am excited to see what we do together in the years ahead. 🌱



Strengthened alumni engagement and mentorship with the launch of an online platform

The launch of the online community The Courtyard gave alumni a new way to connect with each other and mentor students, which became keenly important during the pandemic. More than 3,500 alumni are now members.

“We never rest on our laurels. Instead, we are always pushing forward with new ideas, new initiatives, and new ways to live up to our values.”

DEAN HEATHER K. GERKEN

Championed bridging the theory/practice divide

Gerken is one of the only law school deans who continues to lead a clinic during her tenure. She gathered with the members of her San Francisco Affirmative Litigation Project in April 2022.

