



*Leading the Law School
in an Era of
Innovation and Impact*

MEETING *the* MOMENT

By Erin Shanley





“If you had told me when I was 18 that I would end up spending the majority of my adult life at Yale, I might have thought that was strange,” Cristina Rodríguez said with a laugh as she sat in the Law School’s dean’s office. “But I think it makes sense, because this university enabled me to become the scholar and lawyer I am today.” 🍷



(clockwise from top left) Rodríguez attending a conference at Yale Law School in January; addressing alumni at an event in New York City; in conversation with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson; speaking at a Tsai Leadership event



Rodríguez had taken the helm as Yale Law School's 18th dean just a month before, but her new office was filled with a sense of calm. Her journey through Yale began almost 35 years ago when she arrived at Yale College in 1991 from San Antonio, Texas, where she grew up in a tight-knit family that argued over politics and world affairs at the dinner table. A committed and successful high school debater, she was determined to make it to the Northeast — the setting of the novels she loved most as a child. She studied history at Yale and then at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, after which she returned to Yale to earn her J.D. in 2000. After clerking, launching her teaching career, and performing a stint in public service, she joined the Law School faculty in 2013 and was named the Leighton Homer Surbeck Professor of Law in 2014.

"It's incredibly meaningful, as someone who went both to Yale College and Yale Law School, to have this role within the Law School and the University system," said Rodríguez. "Yale Law School made me the scholar that I am, and so to now have the chance to help shape this institution for new generations of students and future lawyers, leaders, and scholars is a real gift. It feels like the culmination of a lifetime of work and learning."

Leading the Law School at a time when higher education institutions are under pressure and the rule of law feels fragile is undoubtedly a daunting task. But Rodríguez is ready for the challenge. In addition to her vital scholarly career and government experience, she already has been closely involved in nurturing the intellectual life of the School and enhancing the student experience. She has served as deputy dean, chair of the hiring committee, faculty co-director of the Ludwig Program in Public Sector Leadership, co-founder and director of the Public Law Workshop, and co-director of the School's Global Constitutionalism Seminar, as well as co-chair of Yale's University Committee on Institutional Voice.





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“I love this school, and interacting with all of its facets has been enlivening — from alums, to students, to my colleagues whom I’ve known for a long time and who are dear to me, to staff who really keep the Law School running,” she said. “Being at Yale Law School and working closely with and for each of these constituencies is really special.”

A PLACE FOR IDEAS & PATHBREAKING SCHOLARSHIP

Rodríguez aims to bolster the Law School as an institution for innovative scholarship, exploration of ideas, and the production of knowledge.

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Rodríguez said faculty hiring will play a critical role in sustaining and adapting the Law School’s singular academic environment and will be one of her highest priorities as dean. She emphasized that academic hiring decisions will be a collective, faculty-wide effort to nurture the path-breaking and influential scholarship that has become a hallmark of the Law School.

“Maintaining our tradition of interdisciplinary study will be really important,” said Rodríguez. “We need to encompass diverse fields and methodologies and sustain work that is timeless and poses challenging new questions.”

Rodríguez said her own experience with faculty mentors during her time as a law student played an important role in shaping her career and scholarly pursuits, and she hopes to foster an academic community that continues to nurture those bonds for generations to come.

“My professors at the Law School showed me the virtue and beauty of the life of the mind and helped me to see that I could be a legal scholar who played a role in the world at large,” said Rodríguez. “This sort of mentorship should be a defining feature of the Law School.”



Rodríguez co-organized the American Bar Foundation's Northeast Roundtable on "The Future of Latinos in the United States: Law, Opportunity, and Mobility," on April 8–9, 2017.

OPEN EARS & OPEN MINDS

Rodríguez has spent the early months of her deanship diving into the intricacies of how the Law School functions and listening to the ideas and perspectives of the broader community to help shape the Law School's future. So far, promoting community; grappling with how AI will change teaching, learning, and the legal profession; cultivating commitment to core principles of the rule of law; and expanding access to legal education have emerged as key objectives.

Rodríguez is also looking forward to engaging with and drawing ideas from the alumni community.

"We have a unique intellectual community here made up of the most creative and ambitious students, and a group of scholars who are testing the limits of their fields and producing challenging and potentially field-altering ideas," she said. "I think that combination helps to produce an alumni community full of leading thinkers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and public servants. Our alumni work across so many different social domains, are leaders at what they do, and are participating in important transformations, as well as in defending the basic principles of the rule of law that the Law School is all about."

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(from top) Rodríguez with Reva Siegel, Heather K. Gerken, and Noah Bookbinder

COMMITMENT TO THE RULE OF LAW & PUBLIC SERVICE

A leading scholar of constitutional, administrative, and immigration law, Rodríguez's commitment to the rule of law and public service has been a throughline of her career in academia and the federal government.

Since graduating from the Law School, Rodríguez's positions have included clerking for Justice Sandra Day O'Connor of the U.S. Supreme Court, teaching as a member of the NYU School of Law faculty, serving as deputy assistant attorney general in the Office of Legal Counsel at the U.S. Department of Justice, and co-chairing the bipartisan Presidential Commission on the Supreme Court of the United States.

Much of her work has focused on presidential power and the structures and functions of the executive branch. Her book "The President and Immigration Law" (with Adam Cox) charts the long history of presidential influence over immigration policymaking and analyzes its implications for the separation of powers and the rights and status of noncitizens in the American polity. Her recent scholarship also includes a series of empirically informed papers on accountability and policymaking within administrative agencies and their relationship to democratic governance, set against the backdrop of monumental changes in administrative law. In all of her work, she explores how institutions channel conflict and pluralism, enabling us to live in disagreement.

Her scholarly and professional background, Rodríguez said, will inform how she approaches the demands of the present moment as a leader in higher education.

"The moment demands a university and a profession that are alive to the challenges of today's world," she said, noting specifically the erosion of democratic norms and the instability and fragility of many of our legal and governing institutions, as well as the rapid pace of technological change. Rodríguez is committed to thinking intentionally and creatively about how the Law School will rise to these challenges.

"I believe in the importance of the university; I believe in the importance of scholarship and teaching; and I believe in the talent, vision, and commitment of our students, faculty, and alums," she emphasized. "To have the chance to lead Yale Law School in this moment of change and uncertainty is an honor and challenge of a lifetime." 🗨️



Rodríguez meets with Veena Dubal (left) before the 2026 Gruber Distinguished Lecture in Global Justice on March 2.

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