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'The school's faculty is one of our greatest strengths'

Nashville School of Law dean reflects on first year in role

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William Koch is dean of the Nashville School of Law. The former Tennessee Supreme Court justice and veteran legal scholar enjoyed this past weekend a formal ceremony related to his position after having served as dean since summer 2014.

Post Managing Editor William Williams recently chatted with Koch about his first year as NSL dean.

After one year as NSL dean, what has been the single greatest achievement the school has enjoyed?

During the past year, I am delighted that we have admitted two new classes of students that are larger than any first-year class we have had in a decade. Graduations, however, are our greatest achievement. Since I have been dean, we have held two commencement ceremonies and have awarded 137 J.D. degrees to students who have completed their legal education through hard work, tenacity and grit.

Relatedly, what remains the major challenge?

Our graduates are viewed by many to be among the most practice-ready law school graduates. Our school's challenge is to maintain and enhance this reputation. We are doing that by (1.) realigning our curriculum to make sure that we are teaching the competencies that most lawyers need, (2.) expanding our student's opportunities to gain real-world practical experience through internships and clinical programs, and (3.) placing a new emphasis on communications skills, particularly on legal writing.

Enrollment is currently about 450 students. Is there a goal for, say 2020?

If we offer two concurrent terms, our current facility could accommodate approximately 700 students. I believe in careful growth. Taking into consideration the current trend in applications to law school, I would like to see our student body increase to approximately 600 by 2020.

What can you say specifically regarding numbers, backgrounds, etc. for your faculty?

Lawyers and judges tell us that the school's faculty is one of our greatest strengths. We currently have 51 adjunct professors. They include federal, state, and local judges, as well as prominent practicing lawyers who are respected by their peers.

One professor (Bill Harbison) is currently the president of the Tennessee Bar Association. Another professor (Jeffrey Moblely) is the editor of the treatise considered by most Tennessee lawyers as the definitive authority on wills and the administration of estates. These faculty members are not just academically sound; they bring to their students their wealth of practical experience.

As the 15-year mark of the end of merger talks with Tennessee State University nears, what type of future alignments, collaborations and associations with other higher education entities could be in the offing?

Our board of trustees and I are proud of the school's independence. It is what has enabled us to accomplish our historic mission. However, I also believe in collaboration. The school is currently collaborating with Lipscomb University's Institute of Conflict Management to offer our students a negotiation course. I look forward to developing similar programs in the future.

How did your transition from the state Supreme Court to NSL dean go? True, you had been teaching at NSL for many years. Still, that's a big change. Those are two, in many

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respects, very different positions.

Being a dean is quite different from serving on the Tennessee Supreme Court. While I treasure my 30 years as an appellate judge and the friendships I made on the bench, I have not looked back since I left the court.

I have noticed that many lawyers do not laugh as hard at my jokes as they did a year ago.

What is the NSL dropout rate and where would you like to see it in the future?

The attrition rate over four years for our last two graduating classes averaged approximately 20 percent. This rate is significantly lower than the attrition rate several decades ago, primarily because of changes in our admission criteria. While many persons aspire to practice law, not everyone has the tenacity required to be successful.

Our school's mission is to give students a chance to test their skills and abilities against the demands of studying law and then practicing law. While we support our students' aspirations, we know from experience that after attending our law school for a year or so, a number of them will decide that a legal career is not for them.

What percent of your graduates pass the bar exam on their first try and where would you like to see that number in the future?

Bar passage rates throughout the United States have been dropping for the past two years. There is no consensus regarding the reasons.

For our students who graduated in December 2014 and took the bar exam in February 2015, the first-time passage rate for the top 10 percent of the class was 100 percent. The first-time passage rate for the top 25 percent of the class was 85 percent. For the past three bar examinations, our school-wide average passage rate for first-time takers has been 55 percent.

Our bar passage rate compares favorably to the bar passage rate of other non-ABA accredited schools in the United States. In fact, we're in the top quartile. That being said, the faculty and I are committed to improve the bar passage rate for first-time takers, and we now begin preparing the students for the bar exam as soon as they enroll in the first year of school.

NSL tuition for four years (including books and fees) is approximately \$31,800. How do you intend to keep it at that rate (or, at least, minimize that mark's increasing)?

The Nashville School of Law is a nonprofit institution. Keeping the cost of our education low is an essential part of our mission. Accordingly, we avoid erecting financial barriers for students who desire a law degree but who cannot afford to attend law school full-time. Currently, our students pay as they go and graduate with no debt. The costs of providing a quality education will inevitably increase, but we intend to keep the cost of our law degree low by operating with a low overhead and as efficiently as we can.

Has Belmont University's School of Law impacted NSL in some manner? For example, have you lost some faculty members to BU? Has the school perhaps forced NSL to up its game?

Nashville is fortunate to be the home of three excellent law schools. Belmont's new law school is off to a great start, and I am impressed by the school's leadership and faculty, as well as the quality of its students. Belmont has had no impact on our applicant pool or on our other activities. Several of our faculty teach at Belmont and Vanderbilt, and we encourage and support this sort of cross-pollination.

You taught at NSL for 17 years before taking over as dean. But you continue to teach, in addition to your main role. Your thoughts?

It's not uncommon for law school deans to teach. When the board of trustees offered me the opportunity to join the school as dean, one of my stipulations was that I would continue to teach. In addition to a lifetime commitment to the course that I teach — constitutional law — I want to continue to relate to students in the classroom so that I can remain grounded in what it is like to be studying law at the Nashville School of Law today.

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