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## Law School News: Introducing RWU Law's Sixth Dean 07-01-2020

Michael M. Bowden

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July 1, 2020

## Law School News

# Introducing RWU Law's Sixth Dean

In a time of upheaval and change, Gregory W. Bowman, longtime dean of West Virginia's only law school, brings his energy, experience and open-mindedness to Rhode Island's only law school

July 1, 2020

Michael M. Bowden



Dean Gregory W. Bowman takes the helm of Roger Williams University School of Law on July 1.

Relocating to a different part of the country is tough.

Starting a new job is tough, too – especially when you're tasked with leading people you've just met in a culture you're still getting to know.

Doing both these things during a global pandemic and amid unprecedented national protests demanding fundamental social change? That's uncharted territory.

And it is precisely this territory that Gregory W. Bowman begins traversing today, as he takes the helm as the sixth dean of Roger Williams University School of Law.

Discussing the journey ahead as he sat in his new riverfront home in Warren, R.I., a few days ago, Bowman projected confidence, competence, and preparedness – but also a genuine openness to new ideas, and an appealing humility. While not underestimating the challenges that lie ahead, he consistently framed them as opportunities for positive change and forward movement.

The COVID-19 crisis, for example?

“In many ways, it's reaffirmed what's most important,” Bowman said. “The modality of our interaction might be different; we're not sitting around chatting in person, we're on Zoom instead, but it's the same process. And it's still essential to get to know a place, to understand the people in that place, what makes them tick and why.”

The spring lockdown, moreover, saw law professors rapidly embracing new technologies and innovative methods, “trying and caring and wanting to make sure that students got the knowledge that they needed to succeed.” Many of these developments, he added, are likely to remain in place long after the pandemic has passed, improving the options available for delivering a legal education in the future.

As for the massive global protests that have followed the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers?

“Well, it's long overdue, isn't it?” Bowman said. “There's a systemic, pervasive problem with racism in our country and, until it is widely acknowledged, nothing's going to change. So it's essential to have some uncomfortable conversations, and to take actions that may push us outside our comfort zones – because without implementation of change intended to directly counter these problems, nothing's going to get better.”

Legal educators, he added, are uniquely positioned to facilitate this work.

“When we, as law schools, are doing what we should be doing, we're agents for social change,” Bowman said. “We seek justice, we defend those who might otherwise not have help; we provide opportunities, training, and support for the leaders of a more diverse future. We need to be listening to, understanding, and supporting all these amazing, wonderful, talented people.”

He added, “The more diversity, the more backgrounds and viewpoints and experience we can bring into the law, the more we can build a legal profession that reflects the society it serves. That is one of the greatest challenges of our time – and one of the greatest opportunities.”

'A Real Sense of Place'

At first glance, a shift from West Virginia – where Bowman grew up and spent much of his childhood and later professional life – to Rhode Island might seem like a radical change. And to be sure, the relatively flat, coastal contours of the Ocean State present a distinct contrast to the thickly forested elevations of landlocked West Virginia, not known for nothing as the Mountain State.

“The state’s tourism slogan is ‘Wild, Wonderful,’ and that phrase really does capture something important about the state,” a lifelong resident recently observed. “Geographically speaking, it’s gorgeous. Trees everywhere, rivers and creeks, too. And always the presence of mountains in the background. Clean fresh air, beautiful, starry skies at night. Our biggest cities are still relatively small. At any given time, you can drive about 20 minutes and be in the middle of nowhere. There’s so much wildlife. Plenty of friendly people, too, and classic southern hospitality depending on the area. But the economy is less attractive, as can be the politics.”

(Maybe that last sentence, at least, will ring a few bells for many Rhode Islanders.)

Like Rhode Island, West Virginia is also a state with only one law school – the highly rated West Virginia University School of Law, where Bowman taught for ten years, and served as dean for six. The state also shares with Little Rhody the kind of idiosyncratic charm that he admires.

“I’ve got a real fondness for places that are maybe small, but have found a place in the world in a way that’s true to themselves while still being fully engaged,” said Bowman, who has lived and worked at various times in Denmark, South Korea and Switzerland. “Rhode Island has a real sense of place. It’s got a distinctive feel to it. It has its own character. I enjoy the sense of history. I love being on the water.”

So the opportunity to live in and serve in this community is one that truly engages him.

“I’m excited,” Bowman said. “I think it’s important to listen to what your instincts, your heart, your gut. And from my very first interview here, I had a sense that Rhode Island was a place where I’d like to be. And I’m especially thrilled to be joining this law school and university.”

He sees RWU Law as being uniquely placed to deepen and expand its already significant bonds with the bench, bar, nonprofit community and beyond.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity to be at a place that has such an important role in the state and the region – training the lawyers and leaders of the future, doing important work in so many areas, particular with its focus on public service and public interest.”

Among his many hopes and goals? “I’m very, very interested in finding a way to establish an Access to Justice Commission or Center for the state of Rhode Island.”

**Rooted in Practice**

A knowledge of the dean's past brings his approach into still clearer focus. Growing up in West Virginia, Greg Bowman "always had this strong sense of the horizons being bigger than what I could see." He and yearned to explore this larger world.

So immediately after completing high school, he studied for a year abroad in Denmark before going on to major in economics and international studies at West Virginia University, where he graduated *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa. Though law school was always in his sights, Bowman deferred his acceptance for a year – which he spent earning a master's degree in Economics of the European Community at the University of Exeter in England – before completing his J.D. at Northwestern Law.

Upon graduation, Bowman clerked for the Honorable Pierce Lively of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. He was pretty sure he wanted to teach, but decided to give practice a try first, accepting an associateship with the international law firm of Baker McKenzie. He ended up remaining there for nine years – first in the firm's Chicago offices, later in Washington, D.C. – with a concentration in international trade, corporate compliance and, in the wake of 9/11, Homeland Security law.

"It was intellectually stimulating and challenging," Bowman said of his years in practice. "I didn't just like it, I really loved it. I enjoyed the particular kinds of work that I did. But after a while I began thinking again, 'If I really want to teach' – and I did; I felt that calling – 'then I had better get to it.'"

So Bowman left Baker McKenzie and moved on to academia, teaching law first as an adjunct at the University of Mississippi and later as a full professor at Mississippi College School of Law. He noted that his years of legal practice had a strong influence on his approach to the job.

"It deeply impacted me," Bowman said. "To this day, every class I go into, I tend to think in terms of the 'deliverables' I want my students to receive. I try to make sure that I'm clear and concise, contextualize everything we're doing, and ensure that it's relevant to what *they're* doing. That applies to my scholarship as well, by the way. Whenever I go into a project, my first question is, 'Why is this going to matter? How will it be relevant to someone who is looking at it for practical and technical application?'"

In 2011, Bowman returned to his home state to accept a professorship at West Virginia University College of Law. By 2013, he'd earned tenure; then, following a yearlong stint as the school's associate dean for academic affairs, he was appointed interim dean. A year later, he became WVU Law's full, William J. Maier, Jr. Dean, a role in which he remained until just this week.

### 'The Servant-Leader'

Asked about his approach to running a law school, Dean Bowman emphasized that he did not see deanship as a one-man show.

“I very much believe in the concept of the ‘servant-leader,’” he explained. “We are a service profession, literally. So at RWU Law, I see myself as a servant of the public at a private university, helping to train tomorrow’s leaders.”

How effectively he can perform that service, he added, depends to a great degree on the people with whom he is surrounded.

“I believe in building a team,” Bowman said. “It must be diverse in terms of background, race, experience, gender – that way, you get better decision-making. And it must have a high level of mutual trust. I believe that blame should flow uphill, and credit should flow downhill. Part of a leader’s job – for me, anyway – is to give people who are on the team an opportunity to do great work and to shine. And those opportunities get built through relationships, personal relationships – getting to know the faculty and the staff, getting to know the students.”

Indeed, Bowman sees law students – those future leaders with whom the law school is tasked with training and educating – as an essential part of his team as well.

“At WVU, I grew much closer ties with student leadership,” he explained. “I met with the president and vice president of the Student Bar Association on a monthly basis, and I attended the student organization president’s meetings – to engage, provide advice, and just to listen. Because one of the neat things about law school is that it’s often the students who have the best ideas. So, I listen to them, learn from them, engage with them, and keep those lines of communication open.”

Bowman tends to get on well with students in general. As a professor at WVU Law, he won teaching awards with some frequency.

“Yeah, I love teaching,” he said. “It’s not just a job, it’s a calling, because I almost can’t imagine doing anything else. Being in the classroom with students is, for me, one of the happiest places on earth.”

And what distinguishes a good teacher?

“Sincerity and a desire to help,” Bowman replied. “And I think most law students can detect right away whether those elements are present. I genuinely respect and like my students. I’m glad to be there. I try to bring a good energy into the classroom. My feeling is, there’s no such thing as a stupid question, so you never embarrass anybody. You treat everybody fairly. You don’t play favorites.”

Another major key, he said, is realizing that your students are only students for a relatively brief moment – in the blink of an eye, they’ll become your peers.

“I think about that fact that every time we walk into the classroom,” he said. “What we’re doing here is training our future colleagues – from that very first day of orientation onward. In three years, those students are our colleagues. So I think of them as such and treat them with respect

and professionalism from the start. From there, the operative question becomes: what do they need from us to succeed?”

Bowman’s short-form answer?

“Innovative law schools that step out looking toward the future, creating new programs that benefit their students and address social challenges,” he said. “Those are the successful law schools of the future. And I think Roger Williams Law is in a place where we can really build on the many amazing, wonderful things that have already been accomplished, and train smart, fantastic lawyers who are ready to go out and continue changing their world.

“And I am here to help.”