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Rhode Island Lawyers Weekly

Roger Williams University School of Law

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Law School News

RWU Law dean seeking to build on culture of service, innovation

December 9, 2020

Barry Bridges, Rhode Island Lawyers Weekly



RWU Law Dean Gregory W. Bowman.

Image Credit: James Jones/RWU Law.

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After graduating from Northwestern University's Pritzker School of Law, Gregory W. Bowman, the newly appointed sixth dean of Roger Williams University School of Law, initially followed a "BigLaw" trajectory and joined Baker McKenzie, where he practiced as an international trade and corporate attorney.

But in 2004, the West Virginia native heeded an inner voice and made the move to the hallways of the legal academy, launching his teaching career at Mississippi College School of Law.

"Life is full of chapters. I loved practicing law, but I felt this really strong calling to teach and mentor future lawyers," Bowman says. "I enjoyed mentoring newer lawyers at the firm, and I wanted to do that on a much larger scale. I think in my heart I always wanted to teach."

In 2009, Bowman joined the faculty of West Virginia University College of Law, another "only in the state" institution, and served as the school's associate dean for academic affairs before being named dean in 2015.

With that foundation, Bowman took the reins at RWU in July at a time when the pandemic was challenging assumptions and changing the playing field for educators of all stripes. He cites RWU's public service bent, its commitment to diversity, and the school's unique position in the state as factors that attracted him to Rhode Island.

"RWU Law has all of the elements to succeed as an innovative, modern law school — dedicated staff and faculty, a clear sense of mission, and an opportunity to collaborate with other parts of the university. I am excited about what we are doing," Bowman says.

With his first semester at the helm wrapping up, Bowman recently fielded questions on keeping the law school on solid ground during the pandemic and amid broader changes in the legal education landscape.

Q. Why was RWU Law's deanship an attractive opportunity for you?

A. One huge advantage RWU Law has is that it is the only law school in Rhode Island. We have these great relationships with law firms, companies, nonprofit organizations, judges, legislators and so on. This provides lots of exciting learning and career opportunities for our students, and so many opportunities for the law school to serve the state. I saw this same sort of solo law school advantage when I was at WVU Law.

Another thing that attracted me was RWU Law's strong culture of service. Our legal clinics, externships and pro bono programs are national caliber, and my faculty and staff colleagues who run these programs are top notch. We are a service law school that trains students to be lawyers with a client service mindset, and I love that.

A third key reason that I came to RWU Law is that there is opportunity to innovate here. The university has a new president and a new provost, who, like me, are deeply dedicated to

innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration among the university's colleges. The faculty and staff at RWU Law have demonstrated a willingness to work hard and innovate in ways that benefit our students and serve the public. Just look at what this law school has achieved since its founding. I really believe that the successful law schools of tomorrow will be those that innovate and collaborate. RWU Law has these key ingredients for future greatness.

Q. How has RWU Law managed the pandemic? Has in-person instruction largely continued? Will the experience have a permanent effect on the delivery of legal education?

A. I am really proud of how we have managed the pandemic all across the university. This fall we have a combination of in-person classes, hybrid classes and fully online classes. Students and faculty could choose whether to attend in person or remotely, and approximately 30 percent of our law students and faculty stayed fully online this fall. Masks and social distancing were mandatory. We implemented enhanced cleaning protocols, and all students, staff and faculty who were on campus received regular COVID-19 tests.

The old saying is that necessity is the parent of invention, and that's certainly been true during this pandemic. One thing we've learned is that online programming can work in a law school when done right. I think we will be holding online and hybrid classes and events for many years to come.

Q. A hallmark of RWU Law has been its emphasis on clinics, externships and other experiential student programs, which is now among the ABA's requirements for accredited schools. Does the RWU curriculum strike the right balance between traditional classroom courses and "practice ready" offerings?

A. RWU Law's experiential education programs are among its key strengths, and I think it does a great job of balancing doctrinal education and experiential learning. Our doctrinal classes provide students with the knowledge and tools for practicing law; our experiential programs help them learn how to use them. And representing a client while in law school really teaches you what it means to be a lawyer.

"Thinking like a lawyer" is really only part of the battle. We would never say that a woodshop class just teaches you to "think like a carpenter." It teaches you how to be one, too. We teach our students how to think like a lawyer and how to be one, and they learn why it matters.

Q. In a nutshell, how would you describe the premise of your 2018 Toledo Law Review article, "The Rise of the Creative Law School"? How will you bring those ideas to bear at RWU?

A. That article encapsulates a lot of my thinking about legal education, and I really enjoyed writing it. From the late 1800s until about 2010, U.S. law schools have followed the same model of legal education, and it was a tried-and-true recipe for success.

But ever since the financial crisis of 2008, U.S. legal education has experienced rapid and massive change that is both destabilizing and disconcerting. Students don't automatically see legal education as a secure career path anymore. Some U.S. law schools have closed, and many others have eliminated programs. So while 20 years ago a law school could succeed by not changing, law schools today have to be creative, nimble and forward-thinking. Collaboration with other disciplines to create new classes and new legal programs of study will be essential. And innovation in the classroom now matters more than ever.

Q. What steps can the head of a law school take to enhance the diversity and inclusiveness of the student body, faculty and staff?

A. This is one of the most important questions for legal education. To be truly effective, the legal profession must reflect the population we serve. And to do that, we need to be a community that is diverse, inclusive and dedicated to belonging. We must look for, recruit and support talented faculty, staff and students from many different backgrounds and places, and we must have a "growth mindset" — we must be lifelong learners who strive to improve both who we are and how we support all members of our community.

We must change how we look at and teach about the law and its power structures. And we must understand that this benefits everyone. All boats rise when we focus on diversity, inclusion and belonging.

RWU Law has been very dedicated to this, and we will continue to be. And in doing so, one thing we will continue to be committed to is listening to and including our students in this work. We exist to serve them, and our students — the lawyers and leaders of the future — deserve it.

Q. What should the school's priorities be in its next 25 years?

A. RWU Law has a strong foundation, but over the next 25 years there will be a lot of change in higher education and in society. We will need to stay quick on our feet and think about innovative ways to train our law students and serve the legal profession and society. I think we will see greater collaboration with other disciplines in higher education, more online and remote learning, and more focus on technology and the law.

But I also think we will need to stay true to some of the law's core values, such as individual liberty, privacy, equal protection and justice.

In a rapidly changing world, those who can see change coming and adapt quickly will succeed. I think RWU Law is that sort of law school.

Q. At your first RWU Law commencement ceremony next spring, what advice will you give to newly minted J.D.s ready to start their careers?

A. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Every calling is great when greatly pursued." And I think there is no more noble profession than the legal profession when one pursues it as a calling — as a way to help make the world a better place. I will tell our new graduates — who on that

day will become our brand-new colleagues — to follow their hearts and use their legal knowledge and skills in the service of others. That is what living greatly within the law means. That is why I am a lawyer and law professor.

Q. How do you spend your time away from the law school?

A. I love my job; it is my calling. But away from it I love to travel whenever I can, both in the U.S. and abroad. I was born overseas, studied in Europe for two years, and have run study-abroad programs in three different countries on three different continents. I practiced international trade law and worked for clients across the globe.

Travel gives me perspective, and it brings me joy. I love visiting a place for the first time, and I love returning to familiar places, too. It's like seeing old friends again. I miss those experiences right now.

I also had imagined that I would be able to explore all over Rhode Island; there is so much to do and see here. The pandemic has interfered with that, and I look forward to post-pandemic adventures in my new home state.