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Law School News

‘A Very Clear Mission’

A public interest star—and top national advocate for first-generation law students—joins RWU Law.

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| Michael M. Bowden



Professor Monica Teixeira de Sousa

Upon graduating from law school, Professor Monica Teixeira de Sousa—who joins the faculty of Roger Williams University School of Law this fall—was well positioned to slip into a comfortable role at any number of elite law firms. Instead, she returned to her adopted home state of Rhode Island to work as a public interest lawyer. Later, as an academic, Professor Teixeira de Sousa’s focus would expand to encompass the unique challenges and obstacles facing first-generation law students.

“On the one hand, my aim is to support individual students and make sure they have the opportunity to succeed and thrive in law school,” she explained. “On the other, it’s part of a larger project to see how we, as a country, are supporting this demographic—basically ensuring that the American Dream is really something that’s true, not just on paper, but in reality.”

Her passions were inspired, at least in part, by childhood experiences.

Born in Portugal of Cape Verdean parents, Teixeira de Sousa immigrated to the United States when she was eight years old. Her family settled in Pawtucket, RI, where they found a welcoming community of distant family members and friends, ever ready to assist in matters of shelter, transportation, and other essential needs as the family adjusted to American life.

A talented student, Teixeira de Sousa excelled in her schoolwork, eventually graduating from Brown University, and then earning her JD at Georgetown Law.

“I went away to law school, but always with an idea that I was going to come back to Rhode Island,” she explained. “It’s hard to pinpoint a single reason why; it was many things. But I think having been an immigrant and seeing how fortunate my parents were to have had those forces of informal support and help—that just stayed with me. I always wanted to be involved in trying to provide that same kind of assistance to people who are not so fortunate.”

The challenge was finding a way to make such a career move financially viable. A solution presented itself when Teixeira de Sousa, as a 3L at Georgetown, applied for—and was ultimately awarded—a Skadden Fellowship, one of the country’s most prestigious opportunities in public interest lawyering.

“Skadden enabled me to come back home and work at Rhode Island Legal Services [RILS],” she said. During she fellowship, Teixeira de Sousa created a legal clinic at her former elementary school in Pawtucket, representing parents and students in school discipline and special education cases, as well as public benefits and eviction defense matters. When her two-year fellowship ended, RILS hired her as a full-time staff attorney.

While her career eventually shifted to academia, Teixeira de Sousa’s relationship with RILS—and public interest law in general—has persisted. In 2014, she took a sabbatical from teaching to work as a volunteer attorney in RILS’s Public Benefits Unit. And her current pro bono work includes volunteering in RILS’s Housing Unit (through a collaboration with RWU Law’s Feinstein Center for Pro Bono and Experiential Education).

First-Gen Law Students

Beyond her pursuits in public interest law, Teixeira de Sousa has also developed a profound academic interest in first-generation law students, on both the individual and societal levels.

Her individual concerns sprang largely from her experiences as a tenured law professor at New England Law | Boston, where she created and served as the director of that school’s First Generation Students Program.

“Every year I would have students who talked to me about being the first in their families to go to college,” she said, “and about how difficult the law school experience was for them at times—how isolated they felt. I came to believe that law schools need to do more to support these students; to really make them feel welcome, that they belong. Because being first generation is,

in many ways, an invisible identity. As a first-generation student, you don't necessarily know who your peers are, unless something is done at the institutional level to really try to bring these students together."

On a societal level, Teixeira de Sousa says, these issues involve nothing less than the American Dream itself.

"The truth is, our society itself is incredibly stratified," she said. "There is a certain inequity that is really at odds with how we like to view our country. We think we are, at least in some ways, a classless society; that we're meritocratic—but the data doesn't really support these notions. If you look at where first-generation students tend to be, studies show—well, by and large, they are not at your top-ranked law schools. They comprise, for example, a very, very small percentage of students at schools such as Harvard Law, Yale Law, etc."

Teixeira de Sousa is currently preparing an article for the upcoming edition of *Roger Williams University Law Review*, titled "The Law Professor and the Therapist", subtitled "Beyond Belonging: There's a Place and a Need for Group Solidarity."

"When I was at New England, the approach that I developed was to partner with a clinician, a therapist," she said. "We would co-facilitate these regularly occurring group meetings for the first-generation students—think of an AA meeting in a church basement! You go around the room and do a check-in; everybody says how they're doing that week. They talk about the challenges they're facing, but also celebrate any successes they're having. It's a safe place for the students to really be their authentic selves in a way that they may not feel they can be in a large classroom."

In addition to personal issues, the students also raise broader concerns, Teixeira de Sousa noted.

"Bigger-picture issues would arise, such as, hey, why are so many of these public interest internships unpaid? Are they really accessible to a first-generation student who is more likely to be coming from a low-income background?" she explained. "That would lead to a discussion of how some students may not be able to afford to do unpaid internships and get the type of public interest resume that might make them more attractive to an employer later on."

She noted that this is just a single example of how "bringing these students together, and supporting them individually, also translates into empowering them to work on issues that can help others in their group."

Home to Rhode Island

For Professor Teixeira de Sousa, returning to Rhode Island is a true homecoming—in both a professional and personal sense (her mother and many other relatives still live here). But the biggest attraction, she said, is the feeling she gets from the law school itself.

"One of the main attractions for me is the genuineness of the people here," she said. "The first word that comes to my mind is 'community'. Though I've only been here a short time formally, I

already feel as though I'm part of this community. And I feel like there's a very clear mission on the part of the people who work here.”

To illustrate, Teixeira de Sousa referenced RWU Law's 2022 Orientation ceremony for new students, where Associate Dean of Enrollment and Strategic Initiatives Michael Donnelly-Boylen recounted his own feelings of insecurity when he first started working at RWU Law and a law professor asked about his father's position at the law firm where he worked. The answer was, he was not a lawyer, but the janitor.

Teixeira de Sousa said she was moved to tears. “You see? All the first-generation students in that room – that's the first message that they're getting from one of the deans: ‘It's okay for you to be who you are.’ It doesn't matter what your father or mother does for a living. You are welcome in this community. And that means a lot to me—to be at a place where I feel I share the values that are being not just spoken, but really lived by people working at the school.”

Professor Teixeira de Sousa has served as a member of the Rhode Island College Upward Bound Program Alumni Scholarship Committee since 2013. She serves on the board of directors of both the Cape Verdean American Lawyers Association and the nonprofit Justice at Work. As an academic, she has written and presented on issues of equity and education law and policy. At Roger Williams, she teaches Property, Family Law, and Race & the Foundations of American Law.