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Bloomington



IU Maurer's dean builds relationships beyond the law school

Marilyn Odendahl July 16, 2014

Walking into his office, Austen Parrish apologizes the space still has a just-moved-in look.

Indeed, the dean's office at Indiana University Maurer School of Law is spacious, comfortable and flooded with light from a big bay window. But Parrish, having arrived at the start of the spring semester, has not had time to arrange furniture, hang pictures and fill the shelves with books and personal mementos.

The tall, personable law professor from Los Angeles was selected dean of the Bloomington law school in December 2013 after a protracted search. He stepped in to lead the oldest state-supported law school in the Midwest during a time of change and uncertainty in legal education.

Parrish was happy at Southwestern Law School where he taught and served as an administrator for 11 years. He liked the school and his work so much that he was never tempted to apply for the dean vacancies that open every year – until he learned IU Maurer was looking.

Crediting former Dean Lauren Robel and interim Dean Hannah Buxbaum with positioning the law school for the future and creating innovative programs, Parrish said he wanted to come to Indiana.



Dean Austen Parrish has introduced scholarship programs with two Indiana colleges and created a

And the state of his office is not an indication that he intends to use the school as a quick stepping stone to another position elsewhere. Instead, as he sat at the conference table shoved too close to the bookshelves in his office, it became apparent he has not had time to decorate because he has kept a full schedule crafting and implementing his plans to keep IU Maurer a top-tier law school.

student advisory committee at Indiana University Maurer School of Law since joining the school this year. (Photo courtesy of Debbi Conkle)

“You don’t want to be naïve about what the challenges are out there,” Parrish said. “It means you don’t spend large amounts of money, you try to be conservative, you try to cut expenses where you can. But you also try to build on your strengths, and you move forward aggressively with the idea that moving forward aggressively and maybe doing things a little differently than other people are doing is a great way to get yourself ahead while other places are stumbling.”

Building relationships

Just months into his tenure, Parrish has introduced his own innovation by entering into scholarship programs with Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology and Wabash College. The partnerships are intended to identify and court talented undergraduates to pursue a career in the law and to come to IU Maurer for their legal education.

For Wabash College, the partnership contains two elements – scholarships that will provide half of the law school’s tuition and a mentoring program connecting students with practicing lawyers and law professors.

Scott Himsel, visiting associate professor of political science and chair of the prelaw committee at Wabash, is especially excited about the mentoring aspect.

Coming from a southern Indiana farming family that does not have any lawyers in its family tree, Himsel learned from experience that mentors can offer much-needed guidance and support. They can advise their students on topics ranging from what a lawyer does and what college classes are most helpful to the more mundane concerns like how to apply for a job.

Himsel is an alumnus of Wabash College and a partner at Faegre Baker Daniels LLP.

Wabash has a history of sending its graduates to law school but still, he said, the college was thrilled when Parrish proposed his idea. The new partnership will ease the expense for the scholarship recipients and enable them to attend a law school with exciting innovative clinical programs and curriculum, Himsel said.

“I tip my hat to Dean Parrish. He’s an impressive individual,” Himsel added.

Parrish sees potential for creating similar relationships with other undergraduate institutions as well as the U.S. Military and large international corporations. To him, building these partnerships can expand the law school experience from the traditional three years by giving students a deeper connection to IU Maurer.

The associations can introduce the Bloomington law school to students early in their undergraduate years, give them an idea of what a law degree can mean to their future careers, and then keep them very involved with the school after they graduate.

“To the extent I am able to lock in these programs, then they provide me not only a way to continue to attract the nation’s best and brightest but also to provide them with focused job pathways,” Parrish said. “So somebody’s coming to the school not because they’re unsure what they want to do but rather they’re using the J.D. to advance themselves either in business or in law.”

‘The whole package’

Within IU Maurer and the larger Indiana University, Parrish has also been creating relationships and collaborations. He established a student advisory committee to get feedback on initiatives, and he regularly seeks out ideas from faculty and alumni.

Former IU Maurer Dean Bryant Garth believes Parrish’s habit of seeking guidance and consensus from the faculty makes him especially well-suited to lead the Bloomington law school. The faculty in Indiana is close knit, and they do not want a dean who is dictatorial, rather, someone with whom they can collaborate.

Garth worked with Parrish at Southwestern and said early on colleagues recognized Parrish was a talented teacher and legal scholar. Parrish worked very hard, Garth said, and exercised good judgment.

“He had the whole package,” Garth said. “It was clear he was on his way to something bigger than what he was doing.”

His career path was not always clear. Parrish did not consider becoming a professor until the arrival of his first daughter made him want to spend more time with his family.

Parrish confessed he did not have a strong reason for going to law school in the first place, attributing his decision to all the adults who said his childhood trait of talking a lot would make him a good lawyer. After he graduated from Columbia University Law School in 1997, he joined the Los Angeles-based firm of O’Melveny & Myers where he handled large, sophisticated business litigation.

There, he logged many hours and, as he put it, traveled an insane amount. So days before his daughter was born, he joined Southwestern as a legal writing instructor.

He excelled as a teacher and quickly moved into the law school’s administration, first by serving as the

Austen L. Parrish

Position: dean, Indiana University Maurer School of Law

Age: 42

Hometown: Vancouver, British Columbia

Family: wife and two daughters, ages 7 and 11

Education: University of Washington and Columbia University School of Law

Law firm: associate in the litigation department of O’Melveny & Myers LLP for five years

Classroom: professor for 11 years and interim dean for 17 months at Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles

Quote: “I have to be honest, working with 22 year olds is sometimes more fun than working with opposing counsel.”

Source: IL staff

director of Southwestern's summer law program in Vancouver and eventually as interim dean.

John Applegate, IU Maurer professor and chair of the search committee that recommended Parrish, saw the new dean's enthusiasm immediately. Applegate said Parrish had barely unpacked his desk before enlisting the entire law school community to help students find jobs.

"So far, Austen has been exactly what we hoped and expected – energetic, lots of ideas, and a great communicator," Applegate said.

In Bloomington, Parrish has kept long hours. His duties include meeting alumni, trumpeting the school's national reputation, managing a very talented faculty and staff, hustling to maintain the school's high ranking and making sure the students have a good educational experience.

Mostly, he said the job is enjoyable and he is looking forward to being a part of IU Maurer history.

"I'm not expecting radical changes," Parrish said. "I'm expecting to look for efficiencies where we can. I'm looking for us to be more aggressive. Maybe we shake things up by adding new things here and there, and we add new relationships and we do things better. But the core, I think, is very strong."•