New Dean's Full Agenda Leaves No Time for Decorating

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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's position.

Parrish has introduced scholarship programs with two Indiana colleges and created a student advisory committee at Indiana University Maurer School of Law since joining the school this year.
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.

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 shoveling 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.

"You don't want to be naive 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.

"There, he logged many hours and, as he put it, traveled an insane amount. So 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 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."