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Lauren Robel (2002 Acting; 2003-2011)

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2013

## Is the Ourlook for the Law Faculty Employment More Fickle Than Most Juries?

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### Recommended Citation

Robel, Lauren K. and Hibel, Andrew, "Is the Ourlook for the Law Faculty Employment More Fickle Than Most Juries?" (2013). *Lauren Robel (2002 Acting; 2003-2011)*. 16.  
<https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/robel/16>

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# Is the Outlook for the Law Faculty Employment More Fickle Than Most Professions?

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What does the future hold for law school faculty members? In this month's interview, we are fortunate to have the perspective of Lauren Kay Robel, a Val Nolan Professor of Law and Interim Provost and Executive Vice President at Indiana University Bloomington. Dean Robel discusses how the law professor market has changed and potential trends for the future. She also touches on topics such as the role of tenured legal professors, the increased need and importance of adjunct professors as well as female faculty moving into more leadership positions.

After reading, we invite you to continue the discussion in our [LinkedIn](#) group or follow HigherEd Careers on [Twitter](#).

**Hibel:** *Dean Robel, Congratulations on your recent appointment as the Interim Provost and Executive Vice President of Indiana University (IU) Bloomington. Can you briefly explain your career path that led you to become faculty at a law school and subsequently a career in university administration?*

**Robel:** Sure! I had a traditional career path for the 1980s (a federal appellate clerkship) with a nontraditional personal history (single mother). By the time I came back to academics, I had a blended family with three kids and a newborn. Academics felt like a natural fit: the importance of education in transforming lives was clear and obvious. And academic administration followed straight from that. Curiosity and intellectual humility are pretty important for university administration. Lawyers are known more for the first than the second, but spending any amount of time around the complexity of a research institution hones the second in most of us.

**Hibel:** *In addition to your positions at IU, you also are the President of the Association of American Law Schools (AALS).<sup>1</sup> We at HigherEdJobs believe that professional association membership is a vital part of higher education careers.<sup>2</sup> What attracted you to become involved with this association and also take on a leadership role?*

**Robel:** I became involved in AALS as a young faculty member because I wanted to be part of the conversation about teaching and scholarship in my own area, which is federal courts and procedure. I have been as devoted to the Law and Society Association, which brings sociolegal scholars from across the academy together. Participation in these associations was important to my development as a teacher and a scholar. They both provide so many intellectual and pedagogical resources, no matter what stage in your career you are in. And they bring the opportunity to be engaged with other academics who are interested in constant improvement of the educational experience of students. Being part of the conversation is what is fun and important.

**Hibel:** *The outlook for the law faculty market obviously depends on many factors – supply and demand (of law schools and students), number of retiring faculty, budgets, etc. Considering these factors, in general, what does the outlook for the tenure track law professor market look like today?*

**Robel:** Like other disciplines, law is seeing tenure-track opportunities shrink in order to make possible flexibility in the ways that we offer professional education. The growth of professional skills courses, which often involve non-tenure track faculty, has been the big curricular story of the past two decades. These courses and clinics often involve non-tenure track faculty whose career tracks are not research intensive. And the use of adjunct faculty has increased to meet some of the increasing specialization in law – an upward trajectory that will not slow down any time soon.

**Hibel:** *As noted in our quarterly employment report<sup>3</sup>, we've seen an increase in the number of adjunct faculty postings over the past several years. Are there changing employment trends for adjunct law professors compared to the non-tenure or tenure track positions?*


**Robel:** Yes, I think the opportunities are growing because the adjunct faculty market responds to both the need to provide flexibility and the need for specialization. This trend towards increasing use of non-tenure track faculty is coming to law relatively late. The rest of the university has been there for some time.

**Hibel:** *The law professor market is competitive. According to the AALS, in 2003 there was a 15 percent success rate of faculty applicants receiving appointments and this was improved from 6 percent of previous years.<sup>4</sup> From a historical perspective, how has the market changed in the past decade as far as quantity and quality of applicants as well as the quantity and type of positions?*

**Robel:** For tenure-track openings, the applicant pool looks more like the rest of the academy now than it did when I went into teaching. There are many more opportunities for those going into the academy to have the equivalent of a post-doc period, where they can develop an understanding of the shape of the literature and hone the research questions they are asking. It is unusual now to see people go on to the tenure track without a publication record. And of course many people have noticed that there are more legal academics than before with advanced degrees in other fields. They come to law with well-developed methodologies, so we've seen an explosion of empirical research that looks more like knowledge creation in other fields than the extremely high-level doctrinal analysis that has long characterized legal scholarship. Judges are put off by this change, but I think it is an exciting piece of what the academy does.

**Hibel:** *According to the most recent Economic Status Report from the American Association of University Professors<sup>5</sup>, the average salary increase for full-time professors from 2009-10 was only 1.2 percent which is the lowest increase in the 50 years. Do you think this is indicative of what may happen to faculty salaries in the future? Also, do you think this increase, which is well below the cost of living increase, would deter a person considering the profession of full-time teaching in law as opposed to practicing in the field?*

**Robel:** Does anyone go into teaching to make money? Legal academics have typically been highly compensated if your comparison group is the humanities or many of the social sciences, but very few academics will make the kind of salaries that are available in the competitive market of a top-tier law firm. They are different kinds of positions, and life in the academy is a vocation. If it is not, don't do it. Go earn your fortune!

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## Expert:

**Lauren Robel, J.D.**  
Interim Provost and  
Executive Vice President  
Val Nolan Professor of Law



Lauren Robel serves as the Interim Provost and Executive Vice President of Indiana University - Bloomington. She is also the Val Nolan Professor of...

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Chief Operating Officer and  
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**Hibel:** *According to the most recent statistics from AALS on law school faculty candidates<sup>6</sup>, nearly two-thirds were men and a third were women. Why do you think there is such a discrepancy in the number of male to female faculty candidates?*

**Robel:** Tough question. Here, I think, it helps to contextualize as well. In the humanities, about half of the entering pool nationally was made up of women. In engineering and computer sciences, it is closer to 13 percent. So law looks better than hard science and engineering, but worse than the humanities. Why are we where we are? The national pool of women law school applicants is also slipping down, which is a part of it. But part of this is understanding the difficulties of the tenure track anywhere. Family care still hits women harder, and the early years in academics are still tough on mothers. Institutions need to keep their eyes on this or we will lose ground.

**Hibel:** *You mentioned some of the challenges for female legal faculty in starting careers. Do these challenges change for women as they secure more advanced positions or tenure promotions and how have any challenges changed over time?*

**Robel:** This is an area where I have seen enormous change during my own career. When I started there were so few women we could all tell you exactly how many were on our faculties without thinking about it. We were all swamped with the kind of mentoring responsibilities that come from scarcity of role models. Now, there are so many women deans I couldn't tell you how many there are. I love that women are moving into positions of responsibility in large numbers in law schools. We have real opportunities to assure that this progress is sustained. I encourage women to step up to leadership roles wherever I can. At my own school, last year the associate dean and the chairs of appointments and promotion and tenure were all women. These are important roles for shaping the future of an institution, and I am grateful that we have the depth of talent now to assure that we can play an ongoing and serious role in shaping the professoriate in the legal academy.

**Hibel:** *Focusing our last few questions on careers, a recent article<sup>7</sup> discussed tactics on how to move from being a lawyer to a professor. It stressed the importance of writing and getting articles published. What other things should a candidate, either a new graduate or a practicing lawyer making a switch to academia, do in order to be competitive?*

**Robel:** Really interrogate why you are attracted to all the parts of the academic mission -- research, teaching, and service. So many people know they want to teach, or they want to write, but don't understand the entire role. And you need a real sense of vocation and mission. Why do you want to be in a classroom? Where does it intersect with your passion? You'll be working constantly with students, so can you love doing that? And why are the questions you want to ask important? How will they make the law and the world better? Because scholarship is lonely, and you've got to be sustained by a real commitment to the importance of the questions you are asking. Finally, what does academic service mean for you? Faculty have obligations to the future of their institutions. Are you willing to put in the time to assure that the institution where you make your life is constantly improving, and to develop collegial relationships that make that happen? If all the parts of academic life bring you a sense of joy, go for it. Otherwise, practice law. It is a wonderful choice.

**Hibel:** *You obviously have a true passion for both law and higher education considering all of your past and current achievements in both areas. What do you think has made you excel in the area of higher education and what do you enjoy most about this field?*

**Robel:** I love watching my students develop into professionals, and the lifelong relationships teaching brings with those you teach. I really love the freedom to ask questions and to go where those questions take me. And I get real joy from the development of the institution itself, from helping my colleagues do their work well. All good academic institutions are made up of engaged citizens. It is a privilege to be an engaged citizen in the academy.

**Hibel:** *Assuming a candidate already has the necessary paper credentials, if you were interviewing a person for a law professor position what would the top three things you would be looking for in a candidate during the interviewing process?*

**Robel:** Passion. Intense curiosity. And evidence that the person really understands why the academy is where she wants to be. We are all sustained in this work by the love of it. I always want to know what a job candidate loves, because then I will have a sense of what will sustain that person in the difficult times.

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