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New law dean seeks more funds to improve school

by Jules Schwab
Staff Writer

The new dean of the I.U.-Bloomington law school says it can’t offer faculty members salaries as large as those offered by some law schools and firms.

As a result, I.U. is vulnerable and possibly could have trouble competing with other schools and law firms for new faculty, said Sheldon Plager, who became law school dean in July.

However, Plager added he is optimistic about the law school’s ability to attract new faculty members.

Teaching "isn’t done for the money, and in Bloomington there is the opportunity for a professor to work in a first-class institution with first-class people," he said.

Five positions in the law school became vacant last spring. Plager attributed two of those losses to the fact that more money could be earned by returning to law practice.

Two of the other three faculty members who left I.U. are teaching at other universities. One is a member of the National Security Council Advisory.

Plager said he could not attribute those losses to financial reasons.

"IU. is in the top quarter of the 164 accredited law schools. If we can get the resources for salaries, then we can compete with the prestigious law schools (such as Harvard Law School)," Plager said. "We have the enthusiasm. All we need are the resources."

Plager plans to raise funds for salary increases by seeking alumni contributions to the law school and through fundraising programs. All salary increases must be approved by the I.U. Board of Trustees.

Plager said he is confident that when he raises the funds, the board will support him in making law salaries more competitive.

By meeting with Bloomington law school alumni and appealing to them at an annual law school alumni conference in September, Plager hopes he can raise funds through contributions providing for the I.U. law school’s "margin of excellence."

"The law school’s nucleus has good, strong faculty and they are the heart of the educational process," Plager said. The ratio between teachers and students, Plager added, is too large.

There are about 600 law students and 30 professors, including visiting professors.

Plager said he is in the process of appointing a special committee to identify potential professors and to select "five excellent professors to start next fall." The committee will examine the staff of other law schools, advertise the position and attend a law professor recruiting conference in November before deciding on new faculty.

Along with hiring new faculty, Plager said he hopes to work out the law school’s space problem. The school, according to Plager, needs more shelves and storage space in the library, more seminar rooms, staff space, and additional student lounges and reading rooms. He plans to appoint a building committee to discuss new buildings and long-range facility expansion proposals.

Since 1975, the law school has had four deans — two were acting deans. "It is important to have stability and consistency in leadership. The rapid turnover in deans of the law school did not hinder the school, but held things in the same pattern," Plager said. The law school, according to the dean, is run by the faculty, and the role of a dean is to maintain policy, implement ideas and keep consistency in the organization.

Before coming to I.U., Plager taught for 13 years at the University of Illinois. He also taught at the University of Florida from 1958 to 1964 and was a visiting professor for a year at the University of Wisconsin in 1968. He is interested in environmental studies and has written books on property and water law. Plager lead an Illinois state task force on noise pollution and has served on federal environmental committees.

Plager is considered a "very versatile and well-liked man" by former colleague Peter Hay, associate dean of the University of Illinois Law School. "We hate to see Dean Plager go to Bloomington because the University of Illinois would lose to keep him on the staff," Hay said.