



## **2023 State of the Law School Message**

**Dean Anthony E. Varona**

Hello everyone. I hope that you all enjoyed Veterans Day weekend, and I especially hope that veterans and active servicemembers in our Seattle University School of Law family received our appreciation for their important and selfless service to our nation. *Thank you again.*

I also hope that those of you who celebrate Diwali – the commemoration of light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance – had a joyous holiday this past weekend.

I am pleased to share this video message with you as a new annual tradition at Seattle University School of Law – a State of the Law School Message, online, and accessible to all of you, our students and community members, whether you are principally here on campus or remote. I thank our Student Bar Association leaders for working with me to make this idea a reality.

Over the next 20 minutes or so, I will provide an update on where we stand as a law school, covering topics that include students, faculty, staff, alumni, curriculum, programs, finances, and the broader community. I then will share what we can look forward to in our spring semester and beyond.

As we enter the Thanksgiving season, we have much to be thankful for and about which to be hopeful as we look forward.

First, however, I recognize that many members of our Seattle University School of Law community have been especially affected by the ongoing crisis in the Middle East, and some are more immediately affected than others. In his message last week, President Peñalver noted that “[a]s a Jesuit, Catholic university, we have repeatedly joined our voice with that of Pope Francis in decrying terrorism and war as human failures and in calling for the preservation of innocent human life, the release of hostages, the free passage of aid and the pursuit of lasting peace.”

Our student leaders, faculty, and administrative colleagues have hosted various gatherings on the Middle East crisis, including interdisciplinary discussions and candlelight vigils for peace and healing.

Various student organizations, both here at the law school and across campus, have organized events to build community, promote fellowship, and shed light on the issues. I am particularly pleased to see that the Jewish Law Students Association and the Middle Eastern and South

Asian Law Students Association have partnered with our faculty in very productive and creative ways.

Our professors have been addressing the crisis in Israel and Palestine in our classrooms, where appropriate, and they and our staff have been providing helpful support, fellowship, and resources to our community members most affected by the crisis.

Seattle University and Seattle U Law will continue to provide resources to those who need counseling, fellowship, and other help. We pride ourselves in creating a community that fosters dialogue and collegial collaboration while strictly prohibiting all forms of discrimination and bias, including antisemitism and Islamophobia. Ours is a community that fosters the free and open exchange of ideas in which our diversity is welcomed, celebrated, and protected.

*Now, what is the state of our law school?*

I am happy to report that the state of Seattle University School of Law is one of collective strength, achievement, momentum, strategic ambition, and hope.

### **First, Students**

We continue to attract outstanding, diverse, and well-rounded students from around the region, from across the nation, and increasingly from around the world.

In August, we welcomed the strongest class academically into our JD Program in 13 years. This class also happened to be the most diverse in our law school's 51-year history, with fully 45% identifying as students of color.

Roughly a third of our entering class is LGBTQ+, and over one third are first-generation college graduates. We also are very proud that 9% of our entering JD class are veterans, a high point in our recent history.

We also broke records this year by admitting the largest class ever of international graduate law students, expanding our international graduate student population nearly tenfold from fall 2022 to fall 2023. In addition, we welcomed the inaugural candidates in our new SJD Program, which we launched last spring.

### **Next, Faculty**

The new tenure-track and tenured faculty colleagues who we welcomed in July already have made significant contributions to our intellectual life and to the vibrancy of our classrooms and curricula. Professors Erin Carr, Jeremiah Chin, Pilar Escontrías, Liz Ford, Kip Hustace, and Luke Maher, and SU's new Vice Provost for Global Initiatives Professor Laura Spitz, have enlivened our law school in vital ways. They, together with the rest of our faculty, comprise a community of legal educators here at Seattle U Law that has rightly earned national recognition for their academic brilliance.

For example, the recent FLAIR ranking of faculty scholarly influence ranks Seattle University School of Law as having the top law faculty in the entire Pacific Northwest and the #2 Jesuit,

Catholic law school in the West in terms of faculty academic impact – a remarkable achievement but not a surprising one to those of us aware of the talents and scholarly achievements of our professors.

As with our Faculty, our **Staff and Administration** are strong. My administrative colleagues are dedicated and gifted legal educators who repeatedly go the extra distance for our students.

Over the last six months or so, we have completed a number of important staff reorganizations across many departments in order to become a more nimble and strategic law school that is more responsive to students' needs and conducive to their success.

We have a new Office of Student Development, combining various important student services into a new streamlined administrative structure under a newly created Associate Deanship for Student Development, inaugurated by Dr. Erin Fullner. We have a new Assistant Dean for Career and Professional Development in Matt Etter, and Kristin DiBiase has inaugurated the new role of Associate Dean for Student Life, Diversity & Inclusion.

Our intensified academic excellence and bar success initiatives now are under a new Assistant Deanship held by Professor Jeff Minneti. We welcomed a new and very talented chief development officer to the law school in Feven Teklu, who joined us from Brown University and occupies a new Assistant Deanship for Development and Alumni Relations. And we very recently welcomed Dr. Diogo Magalhães – a celebrated international law programs administrator and legal scholar – to fill the new role of Assistant Dean for International and Graduate Programs.

These administrative leaders join our new academic vice dean, Prof. Brooke Coleman, and various new associate and assistant directors across the law school, who provide critically important services to our students, faculty, and alumni, and who position us very well for our next 50 years.

Our **Alumni** are thriving as leaders in the legal profession and as changemakers, in Seattle, across the Pacific Northwest, and throughout the nation. They continue to assume prominent federal, tribal, state, county, and municipal judgeships, and government leadership roles. Seattle University School of Law graduates continue to lead nonprofit organizations providing critically important legal services, advocating for much needed change, and fighting for justice for those who need it most.

Seattle University School of Law alumni continue to excel in law firm and corporate practice, leadership, and ownership; in civil rights lawyering; and as entrepreneurs and catalysts for ethical innovation. In fact, our graduates are at the vanguard of innovation in industry, society, and law, and are vivifying the Seattle University School of Law Jesuit, Catholic mission of leadership in service of justice every day.

It is no wonder then that our law school's alumni continue to rank #1 among all Pacific Northwest law schools in the overall number of Thomson Reuters Super Lawyers, who comprise the top 5% of practitioners across 70 areas of practice.

One of the qualities that I admire most in our alumni is that they pull others up as they climb. They give back to their alma mater by teaching, mentoring, and hiring our students. They help lead our community and advise me and other senior administrators at the law school, by serving on the Law Alumni Board. And they support our students and programs as donors. At our last PILF Auction alone, our alums were instrumental in raising enough funds for the PILF Grants Committee to be able to award no fewer than 30 PILF Grants to our students – the most such grants in a decade.

In terms of **Programs and Curriculum**, Seattle U Law continues to innovate. Our Flex JD Program is exceeding application targets by double digits. While law school applications are down nationally and especially in the Pacific Northwest, we continue to see strong demand for our four degree programs – the JD, MLS, LLM, and SJD – with JD applications far outpacing national and regional trends.

Our new Technology, Innovation, Law, and Ethics (TILE) Program has already achieved national acclaim in the new issue of the National Jurist magazine as a “top innovation in legal education” and as a leading example of how “law schools are embracing change and better preparing their students for the future.”

Our greatly expanded International Program, led by Associate Dean for International and Graduate Programs Sital Kalantri, for the first time received an “A” grade by preLaw Magazine, and a “Top Law School for International Law” distinction.

Our programs in legal writing, experiential education, racial justice, business law, criminal law, employment and labor law, human rights, and family law also have received recent top ratings by national media outlets. And we were thrilled recently to be named one of the most innovative law schools in the nation.

Our **Intellectual Life** is thriving. We have become a convening law school with a national and international profile. Our rapid response Supreme Court webinar on the SFFA v Harvard and UNC affirmative action decision, a mere 24 hours after the decision was handed down, attracted nearly 2,000 registered attendees and significant national media attention. Having experimented with and proven the concept, we will host similar webinars in the future.

The Seattle University Law Review’s and BLSA’s EPOCH Symposium on the future of affirmative action similarly attracted a who’s who of civil rights and higher education law scholars from across the nation and will generate illuminating scholarship in our law review and others.

Our new Luminaries in Law Lecture and Conversation Series, now in its second year, recently hosted Slate and MSNBC legal commentator Dahlia Lithwick, and will soon host the President of the National Judicial College, Chief Trial Judge Benes Aldana. Just last week, our Influential Voices series welcomed Second Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Myrna Pérez to our community. Not long before that, the India Center hosted a special Luminaries event with Dr. Abhishek Singhvi, an Indian Member of Parliament and one of the most respected advocates before the Indian Supreme Court, most recently arguing in favor of marriage equality on behalf of Indian same-sex couples.

At the TILE launch event, we hosted Gigi Sohn, President Biden's nominee to the Federal Communications Commission and one of the most prominent national experts in technology and social justice.

We've hosted the presidents of the National Hispanic Bar Association and the National Judicial College, the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit's Judge Margaret McKeown, the national gathering of federal administrative law judges, the general counsel of Amazon, Starbucks, AmeriCorps, and the head of the Autonomous Vehicles Industry Association, who happens to be our alum – Jeff Farrah.

We've hosted very distinguished scholars, legal commentators, and law school deans from all over the nation. And we were proud to have as our May Commencement Speaker Twyla Carter, the attorney-in-chief and CEO of The Legal Aid Society of New York, the largest public interest law firm in the nation. Those are some of the most recent VIP visitors to Seattle University School of Law.

The president of the American Bar Association, the first Native American to serve in the role, Mary Smith, will serve as our next May Commencement Speaker. And Seattle U Law will host the 2024 American Bar Association Deans Workshops, bringing together deans of all 197 ABA accredited law schools in Sullivan Hall.

Suffice it to say – thanks to all of you –Seattle University School of Law has become a leader among law schools in convening important gatherings, hosting vital voices and conversations, and in many ways setting the agenda in American legal education.

We continue to be an innovator and leader in **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion** efforts among law schools. In addition to the new DEI role for Associate Dean DiBiase and the nationally prominent gatherings we hosted on the affirmative action decision, we continue to provide strong leadership in the LSAC Pre-Law Undergraduate Scholars or PLUS Program, headquartered at Heritage University in the Yakima Valley. For two years now, this program has sought to create a pathway for college students and recent graduates throughout Central Washington, most of them first generation Native American and Latinx students who are underrepresented in law schools, to attend law school and eventually serve as legal practitioners in their home communities. We are already seeing the fruits of this labor, with several program graduates who have enrolled in our JD program this fall. The PLUS Program is an excellent complement to our LawYours high school pipeline program, and we look forward to serving as a PLUS Program leader for years to come.

This semester's pilot launch of our new 1L Communities and Commons Program has been a success, thanks to the program leaders and the many 1L students who engaged thoughtfully in the Program's events. Our 1L Communities and Commons Program facilitates community-building, fellowship, and inclusion across the 1L curriculum, while encouraging innovative and collaborative pedagogical approaches in the first year, all aimed at improving the student experience.

I also am delighted that, together with our SU sister schools and colleges, we are rolling out new roster-level entries for students' pronouns and chosen names thanks largely to the tireless efforts of our associate registrar, Heather Juul. We appreciate their thoughtful leadership in this important effort.

Finally, Seattle University School of Law administrators, faculty, and alumni have played leading roles in the Washington Bar Licensure Task Force, which recently has recommended important and much needed reforms to the Washington Supreme Court on the manner in which law school graduates can demonstrate their competency and achieve bar licensure.

In terms of **finances**, we are in good shape and on solid footing. Considered in the aggregate, our student enrollments across our degree programs for Academic Year 2024 exceeded our budget projections, thanks particularly to our larger international graduate student cohort. We continue to be careful and shrewd stewards of our resources, and decisions concerning financial expenditures are made principally through the lens of whether and how the expenditures will benefit our students.

In sum, the state of our law school is strong. We have great momentum and energy. We have an academic entrepreneurial mindset rooted in innovation and justice. And we have the right educators and leaders in place to help us reach new and unprecedented heights of achievement in our teaching, scholarship, and service to the profession.

So, **what lies ahead**, and what **challenges and opportunities** do we have to address in the months to come?

First, because a law school is as good as its faculty, we must continue to recruit top faculty talent as new tenureline and visiting professors. The same applies to our staff positions. We need to remain innovative, nimble, and competitive in terms of organizational structure, compensation and benefits, and professional development opportunities. And we must continue to enhance our identification and public promotion of faculty and staff achievements.

We need to ensure that our curriculum remains responsive to the demands of a rapidly shifting practice environment. We must reinforce our areas of curricular strength while establishing new fields of prominence, especially in health law and environmental law. We must be leaders in the technology and law space, including assessing how artificial intelligence impacts the legal profession.

While the Korematsu Center will be departing Seattle University School of Law on June 30, our commitment to civil rights, and much of the Center's staff, initiatives, and programming not only will remain here at Seattle U Law, but we will expand them. We are redoubling our efforts in civil rights law, constitutional law, and social justice, throughout the curriculum and especially in successor initiatives to the Korematsu Center. We will be announcing our exciting plans in the months ahead.

As we continue to grow our international presence and student recruitment carefully and strategically, we will deepen our roots in the Pacific Northwest. As a law school rooted in social justice, we need to continue to do all we can to make law school more affordable and accessible to more students with aspirations and aptitude for law.

In service of that goal, we will roll out our innovative Hybrid Hubs initiative in the months to come, which entails creating hybrid law school presences in Anchorage, Alaska, the South Sound, and the Yakima Valley. This effort will help address the serious problem of legal deserts

in those areas by providing access to legal education to students in their home regions, many of them underprivileged and underrepresented.

Additionally, we are developing 3+3 accelerated admission programs and other initiatives that will provide students with more value and efficiency. And we will continue to find ways to minimize and ultimately eliminate our budget's dependence on conditional scholarships.

As faculty, staff, and administrators, we measure our success in part by how our students perform once they leave the confines of Sullivan Hall. To that end, we implemented a 10-point plan to help prepare our students as thoroughly as possible so they can pass the bar exam on their first attempt. And we will continue to do all we can to help our students find legal employment upon graduation.

We will continue to expand our fundraising initiatives to maintain and build upon our existing strengths, underwrite new student scholarships and faculty research, and sustain vital programs.

And we will continue to better connect with our alumni and showcase their important achievements, in new and innovative ways.

As we venture into our second half-century, we will continue to become more of a convening law school – a national and even international leader in and beacon for an unapologetically progressive, inclusive legal education rooted in our Jesuit, Catholic mission. And we will engage in thoughtful strategic planning, to make sure that we do more of what we do well and can do better, and that we do less or not do at all of what we should leave in the past.

As I close, I will invite you to share your feedback on this message with me at my forthcoming Cafecitos with students; at our faculty, staff, and alumni gatherings; through email; and in our conversations around Sullivan Hall and at events over the weeks to come.

I leave you with a recommended reading. Our Dean Emerita, Dr. Annette Clark, authored an [article](#) recently published in our flagship law review entitled, *"What's Past Is Prologue: The Story of the Sale of the University of Puget Sound School of Law to Seattle University."*

Dean Clark's article is a painstakingly researched, deeply interesting, and beautifully written account of our law school's early history and rebirth as Seattle University School of Law. A link to that article will accompany this video message.

Our first 50 years included many challenges for sure. They also were filled with the kinds of successes and progress and defining experiences that made us the wonderfully warm, embracing, supportive, and innovative community that we are today.

I have much to be thankful for this Thanksgiving, most especially the honor and privilege of serving as dean of this remarkable institution. To everyone watching or listening, I want you to know that the state of our law school is strong and hopeful because of each of you and what you bring to our community, to our Seattle U Law family. I am so very grateful to, and for, you.

Have a great Holiday season, and I look forward to seeing many of you soon.