

2024 Dean's State of the Law School Address

TRANSCRIPT

Hi, I'm Tony Varona, dean at Seattle University School of Law, and I am delighted to share my State of the Law School message with you.

The state of our law school is strong. In so many areas, we are reaching new heights of achievement. In this video message, I will share some of the significant progress we have made on several key, strategic goals, as well as information about the plans in store for the rest of this academic year and beyond.

I have never been more excited about the unique strengths and potential of Seattle U Law, nor more grateful to our community—all of you—for the progress we have achieved together. Seattle U Law is a vibrant and innovative law school that leads with excellence and stands for justice -- all in service to others.

Our academic year got off to a great start. This fall, our entering 1L class topped last year's record and comes with the strongest academic credentials in 15 years as well as the largest cohort of first-gen students in our history. This significant accomplishment builds upon last year's record-breaking 1L entering class, which also broke academic success and diversity records.

Once they are here, our students keep hitting it out of the park in so many ways, earning national recognition in competitions, securing competitive scholarships and fellowships, landing prestigious internships, and so much more. These are just a few of the many highlights.

Once they graduate, Seattle U Law students achieve phenomenal success in practice. In every sense, our alumni are leaders in law who serve with distinction as judges, prosecutors, public defenders, law firm partners and associates, general counsel to firms and organizations large and small, leaders of influential nonprofits, and in so many other important positions. Here are just five examples of our trailblazing alumni.

It is no surprise that our alumni continue to be #1 overall in the annual list of Super Lawyers across the Pacific Northwest. And also not surprising that we have just been named an "Employment Leader" by National Jurist's preLaw Magazine as having one of the most improved placement rates - in the Top 25 nationally, in fact - for new graduates among US law schools.

Our bar success efforts continue to produce positive results, with the recent Summer 2024 pass rates showing promising progress over prior years. In addition, our community has exhibited remarkable leadership in its service on the Washington Supreme Court's Bar Licensure Task Force. You have most likely heard the news that future law students will have new pathways to obtain licensure, and members of our faculty, staff, and alumni community were instrumental in advocating for this seismic and innovative change.

Here is Professor Jeff Minneti, assistant dean for academic excellence and bar success, to share more about this important development.

Thank you, Jeff.

I also am delighted to share the recent good news that Washington's Chief Justice Steve Gonzalez has appointed our own Professor Zaida Rivera as co-chair of the new implementation committee,

charged with putting into place the bar licensure reforms.

Our law school is a convening institution that serves as a center of legal thought leadership. Over the past year, we have welcomed many pathbreaking legal luminaries who work in a range of areas to share their knowledge and wisdom.

I am particularly proud of a new lecture series we created to honor the contributions of legendary Professors Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic to the field of critical justice.

We have hosted many prominent conferences and symposia, including the national ABA workshops for Deans and New Deans, which were held in Sullivan Hall in July.

And we just inaugurated our Dean's Luminaries in Law Lecture and Conversation Series for the new academic year with renowned international human rights leader and jurist Margarete May Macaulay.

With respect to faculty, we welcomed three outstanding new faculty members and senior administrators over the summer – Professors Kathryn Boling, Angela Harris, and Nazune Menka – each a leader in her respective field. I also am thrilled to announce that Professor Francisco Valdes, a world-renowned and widely cited scholar on constitutional law and theory, Latinx legal studies, critical outsider jurisprudence, and queer scholarship, recently accepted our offer to become a distinguished professor of law, starting next summer.

I am immensely proud of the work of our faculty, who continue to display their talent and commitment in the areas of teaching, scholarship, service, and advocacy. They have earned national teaching awards, traveled across the nation and internationally to speak at influential conferences, and published groundbreaking scholarship in prestigious publications.

The newest edition of the Sisk Scholarly Impact Rankings places our faculty as #1 in the Pacific Northwest, and #2 among Jesuit, Catholic law schools in the entire West. Our Sisk ranking this year was the highest we have ever achieved. Similarly, the national Forward Looking Academic Impact Rankings (or FLAIR) name Seattle U Law the top law school in the Pacific Northwest, and in the top 25% among all law schools. Both rankings are a testament to our faculty's scholarly excellence and influence.

Our Academic Vice Dean Brooke Coleman was elected to the American Law Institute, joining a long list of other Seattle U Law professors who are members of this prestigious organization that works on the clarification of the common law.

Additionally, our faculty has advocated for significant changes in Washington state law, resulting in new protections for workers from employer wage theft, and for parents with children who have special education needs.

Now, here is Professor Deirdre Bowen, who will share an update on the Family Law Center's extraordinary work.

Thank you, Deirdre.

Ensuring our law school is accessible to students of all backgrounds is of paramount importance to Seattle U Law. Here is Professor Steve Bender, associate dean of Planning and Strategic Initiatives, to provide an update on our efforts in this critical area.

Thank you, Steve

This past spring, the Class of 2024 included the first-ever students who earned their law degree in our pathbreaking Flex JD Program, which was launched three years ago and enables students who are place-bound due to family, work, or other responsibilities to complete most coursework online while staying in their home communities without uprooting their lives.

A related part of our efforts in expanding access to justice and to legal education is our innovative Hybrid Hubs initiative. We developed this concept after meeting with stakeholders in the South Sound, Central Washington, and Alaska – all areas without a physical law school but where there is tremendous demand for lawyers and legal services.

The goal of the Hybrid Hubs is to create a vibrant law school presence, through our Flex JD Program and related initiatives, that will provide residents of these areas with many of the resources provided by a physical law school presence – including the ability to pursue legal education through an accelerated pathway.

In March, we launched an historic partnership with the University of Washington Tacoma, which serves as our founding principal partner of the South Sound Hybrid Hub, and in April we forged a partnership with Alaska Pacific University to establish a dual degree program.

Just recently, we inaugurated a partnership with Heritage University to establish the Central Washington Hybrid Hub. I am excited to share that Bree Black Horse, a 2013 alumna and an assistant United States Attorney dedicated to prosecuting Missing or Murdered Indigenous People cases, will become the director of the hub.

Stay tuned for more exciting information about the Hybrid Hub in Alaska.

Another goal of mine as dean has been to cultivate a spirit of innovation in how we approach legal education, and to make the most of the competitive advantages that come with being Seattle's law school, at the heart of the global tech hub. We must continue to develop and refine leading-edge programs to ensure our graduates have the knowledge and skills they need to practice in a continually evolving legal landscape.

That is a great segway to welcome Professor Maggie Chon to talk about a program we launched last year – the Technology, Innovation Law and Ethics or TILE Program.

Thank you, Maggie. The components of our new TILE Program are a major reason why the National Jurist named us last fall as one of the 20 Most Innovative Law Schools in the nation.

Using that same innovative spirit, we also developed a Sports Law Program to prepare our students to fill the growing need for practitioners who are well-versed in specific areas of the law to help professional and university sports teams navigate a complex legal landscape.

As we live in an increasingly globalized world, it has been important to broaden and internationalize the reach of our law school, and we have achieved remarkable success. Our LLM program has grown by leaps and bounds. From just three students two years ago, we enrolled 27 in the program last fall and are welcoming many more this fall, with even more growth anticipated. In May, we graduated our largest class of LLM students ever. And we now have international graduate law students hailing from virtually every corner of the globe, including nations such as India, Mexico, Nepal, Ukraine, Russia, Colombia, Brazil, Nigeria, Uzbekistan, Kenya, Venezuela, Lebanon, Egypt, and Afghanistan. We also are hosting distinguished visiting scholars from Morocco and Japan.

I also am excited to celebrate the first successful year of our Doctor of Juridical Science program, in which we have welcomed several overseas scholars who have goals to become legal academics

in their home countries.

Our faculty's expertise in international law and our newfound success in attracting international students and scholars has been noticed by preLaw magazine, which now names Seattle U Law one of the top law schools in the country for international law.

As the 2025 academic year unfolds, there are even more exciting developments on the horizon.

I am excited about the recent expansion of the Center for Civil Rights and Critical Justice, which will grow our law school's commitment to empowering faculty and students to deploy critical research, education, and advocacy to reveal and remove systems of racism, oppression, and exclusion within the law.

We will continue recruiting outstanding new faculty colleagues to join our already illustrious community of scholars and teachers here at Seattle U Law. Throughout this academic year, we will host luminaries in law and convene prominent conferences, symposia, and other gatherings addressing the most pressing legal and policy challenges facing our nation and world.

In short, it is going to be a great year for Seattle U Law and all of us.

I thank you, the Seattle U Law community, for your support of our law school. You are at the heart of our success over the past year, you truly are #leadersservingjustice, and you will continue to be fundamental to everything we do and achieve in this new school year.

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