Deans Step Down at Three Law Schools

Karen Sloan

The deans of Drake University Law School, the University of Illinois College of Law and Widener University School of Law have announced that they would step down at the close of the academic year.

Meanwhile, Texas A&M University School of Law has announced that Andrew Morriss would become its next dean, effective on July 1. Morriss now teaches at the University of Alabama School of Law.

That makes three of Texas’ nine law schools that have hired new deans in the past week: The University of Houston Law Center tapped St. John's University School of Law professor Leonard Baynes, and St. Mary's University School of Law selected University of Arkansas School of Law associate dean Stephen Sheppard.

Until last year, the Texas A&M University School of Law was Texas Wesleyan University School of Law. Texas A&M bought the Fort Worth law school in August for $73 million. Morriss will be the first dean to lead the school under its new name. Professor Aric Short has served as interim dean since the transfer.

"Professor Morriss has not only distinguished himself in the field of scholarship, but comes to us with unique perspective as a faculty member who was integrally involved in enhancing two previous schools of law," interim university president Mark Hussey said.

In April, Texas A&M regent and attorney Tony Buzbee and his wife donated to $1 million to the law school to endow the deanship. In addition, university leaders said they would spend $25 million on the law school during the next five years, provided it raises the same amount from the private sector. The money would fund research and teaching.

At Illinois, meanwhile, dean Bruce Smith announced on Thursday that he would step down on June 1 after five years in the job and return to teaching.

His tenure wasn't always smooth. Most notably, the law school in 2011 revealed that the admissions department had inflated the academic credentials of its incoming students. That episode-blamed on a rogue administrator in the admissions office-resulted in a $250,000 fine.

Still, Smith has helped raise more than $50 million for the school and was a strong faculty recruiter, according to faculty members.

"Dean Smith has worked tirelessly to guide the College of Law through many challenges and opportunities," professor Margareth Etienne said. "Recent gains in student admissions, job placement and fundraising demonstrate that he has firmly placed the college on a positive trajectory."

Professor John Colombo will serve as interim dean at Illinois.

Drake dean Allan Vestal's resignation, also announced on Thursday, takes effect on June 30. He cited health problems. Vestal has led the Des Moines law school since 2009. Before that, he was dean at the University of Kentucky College of Law for eight years.

"I would like to thank Allan for his service at Drake over the last five years," university provost Deneese Jones said. "His leadership has led to significant renovations at Cartwright Hall, the establishment of new clinical programs that serve the community, and increased faculty publication."

Vestal plans to take a year's sabbatical and return to the law faculty in 2015. Professor Benjamin Ullem has been named interim dean.

Finally, Widener announced on Tuesday that law dean Linda Ammons would retire at the end of the academic year. She has overseen Widener's two law campuses in Wilmington, Del., and Harrisburg, Pa., for eight years. Ammons has spent the spring semester on sabbatical. Interim co-deans Erin Daly and Robyn Meadows will continue in their roles until a new dean is selected.

"Dean Ammons has been a tireless advocate for Widener Law," university president James Harris III said. "Her distinguished service has substantially increased the school's visibility regionally, nationally and internationally. The school is stronger for her leadership and I am grateful she has agreed to continue her service as counsel for legal education."

During her deanship, the law school raised more than $12 million, started a veterans law clinic, and created more than a dozen new endowed scholarships.

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