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New law dean at NIU not tied to the classroom

Veteran of several law schools, Dannenmaier sees value of experiential learning for his law students

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The value of hands-on, real life learning experiences as a part of a legal education isn't lost on the new dean at Northern Illinois University College of Law.

Just ask him about his favorite course to teach.

Eric Dannenmaier stepped into the role of dean at NIU's law school last month after having worked at Indiana University McKinney School of Law in Indianapolis the past nine years.

While at the Indiana school, where he served in administrative and teaching positions, he led a course that didn't take place in a classroom, behind a computer or anywhere near a law library.

Rather, his students learned about issues relating to river law while in canoes paddling down a river.

That focus on taking learning outside the classroom is one of the priorities Dannenmaier said he has brought with him to his new position.

NIU's existing offering of experiential learning opportunities in which students work in clinics, externships or in the field, is one of the attributes that makes the law school unique, Dannenmaier said.

While the American Bar Association now requires law students to satisfy a certain number of credit hours in experiential courses, Dannenmaier said NIU began advocating for learning outside the classroom long before the national emphasis on experiential learning.

Some of the school's offerings include courses through its legal clinics in Rockford and Aurora as well as at the main campus in DeKalb.

"NIU has had those courses available for more than a decade," Dannenmaier said. "We can give students an opportunity to actually practice law with real clients under supervised settings with professors so they can start using what they've been learning in the classroom in a managed environment."

"What our accreditor now mandates is something that Northern law has provided for the past decade, so this law school was ahead of the curve in terms of providing that kind of educational opportunity," he said.

Dannenmaier brings with him to the position a long list of his own experiences. Last fall, he was involved in researching environmental law at Washington University School of Law in St. Louis.

From 2007 until this summer, he served as the director of IU McKinney's J.D. graduate programs and founded the environmental, energy and natural resources law program at the school.

His other academic experience includes roles at Tulane University School of Law in New Orleans, where he was the director of the Tulane Institute for Environmental Law & Policy, and he was a faculty member at the University of Calgary in Canada.

From 1996 to 2001, Dannenmaier was the director of the U.S. Agency for International Development while he was a professor at American University's Washington Col-



Eric Dannenmaier

lege of Law in Washington, D.C.

Before he began taking on academic and administrative roles, Dannenmaier's professional experience included work as an environmental attorney at Bryan, Cave LLP in Washington and as a litigation attorney in the Boston offices of McDermott, Will & Emery LLP and the since-shuttered Herrick & Smith.

He graduated from Boston University School of Law in 1984 and went on to earn his master in law from Oxford University, as well as master in law and doctor of the science of law from Columbia University School of Law in New York.

Currently, he is also on the Joint Public Advisory Committee of the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, a post he was appointed to by President Barack Obama. His tenure started in 2014. He also serves on other boards across the country involving environmental law and policy.

After having been involved in the educational side of law for several years, Dannenmaier said he pursued the position of dean at NIU because it seemed like a natural fit.

"For me, it was about the opportunity to contribute to an educational enterprise, to contribute to a law school that's done an excellent job of educating students to become lawyers, practicing in the public interest, practicing in a number of fields of law that advance important social goals," Dannenmaier said.

In addition to its focus on experiential learning, Dannenmaier

cited the college's reputation for sending its graduates on to work in public service as one of the ways NIU College of Law differentiates itself from other schools. About 35 percent of the college's 2015 graduating class went out to work in government and public interest jobs, according to employment data reported to the ABA.

"NIU has a history of producing graduates who practice in the public interest, criminal prosecutors and defenders, government officials, judges and lawyers who, in whatever field, whether it be real estate, personal injury, victims' rights or corporate law, lawyers who bring a sense of ethics and excellence to their work," he said. "I made a deliberate choice to come here because of its history and ability to offer students an excellent education."

A few recent examples of some successful alums who represent the school's commitment to service, Dannenmaier said, include Vincent F. Cornelius, who in June was sworn in as the first black president of the Illinois State Bar Association in its 140-year history, and Clayton Kawski, who was appointed earlier this month by Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker to serve as a Dane County Circuit Court judge.

"It is a community that cares deeply about and stays connected with the school because they care deeply about and stay connected with how law is interpreted, how it's taught and how it's employed to serve society," Dannenmaier said about the school's alumni.

"What's really gratifying about alumni relations is meeting people who are successful and passionate about law and its importance to society and who recognize the relevance of their experience for the next generation of lawyers."

Dannenmaier said he plans to focus on all of the qualities he sees as strong points for NIU, including its alumni base, experiential learning focus and other new opportunities including enhancing its interdisciplinary offerings, as he settles into his new role.

"We're going to build on that foundation and continue to grow. Northern is a law school on the rise and my privilege, my job, is to support that continued growth," Dannenmaier said.

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