Students at the School of Law are increasingly taking advantage of the unique faculty resources available to them both inside and outside the classroom. Not only does the law school offer an enviable academic program, but it is making a priority of bringing the faculty closer to the student body. More than ever the emphasis is on students, and improving their academic and social support through one of the school’s most valuable assets: its incredibly diverse and friendly professors. Through a multitude of opportunities, including “Lunch with the Dean,” “So You Wanna Be A...” lecture series, the Writing Center and the Student Bar Association, the law school is expanding education beyond the traditional classroom setting.

“The students need to know that the faculty and staff are here to provide them with the best legal education,” explains Dean Donald G. Gifford. Along those lines, the school is continuing the “Lunch with the Dean” program, which was effective in helping break down faculty-student barriers last year. This program is an opportunity for each first-year student to meet Dean Gifford, Assistant Dean José Bahamonde-González, Associate Dean David S. Bogen, Associate Dean James F. Forsyth and Director of Student Affairs Tricia D. O’Neill ’87 in a relaxed setting. Over the course of the year, each small section meets separately to discuss issues and policies that are important to them, such as the Honor Code, the implications of poor first-year grades, exam-taking techniques, and an overall assessment of the initial semester.

“This lunch is a great idea. The students who did not attend missed an excellent opportunity to meet with the school’s leadership. It’s good that faculty take time to listen to student concerns,” says first-year day student Jason St. John. Karen Michaels, now a second-year day student, was impressed that last year she was able to have lunch with Dean Gifford and discuss issues of concern.

Striving to improve the quality of students’ lives, O’Neill sees herself as “a liaison, breaking down barriers between the deans, faculty and students.” As a member of the Teaching and Student Environment Committee, O’Neill is working with chair and professor Diane Hoffmann to implement new programs, including additional opportunities for student-faculty interaction, both socially and academically. Last year the law school held 14 “So You Wanna Be A...” lectures that featured faculty and other practitioners from a broad range of legal careers.

Second-year student Pam Smith attended at least three of those lectures including, “So You Wanna Be a Government Lawyer,” “So You Wanna Be a Litigator,” and “So You Wanna Be a Lawyer Who Does It All.” Not only did the lectures give her a better understanding of what attorneys actually do in the real world, she says, but they were instrumental in her contacting professors and understanding that they are accessible.

Profiling a number of public interest lawyers, including professors Michael A. Millemann, Deborah J. Weimer and Stanley Herr for the student newspaper, The Raven, Smith advises: “Getting to know someone who practices your chosen field of law is invaluable resource. The information and inspiration you receive from talking with an experienced attorney outweigh any awkward feelings you might have.”

In addition to networking opportunities, when students want specific help with legal writing, they can receive advice from the law school’s Writing Center, headed by Professor Susan Denise. The Writing Center opened in Spring 1997 to an eager student body, helping nearly 100 students with writing samples, appellate advocacy briefs and certification papers (affectionately known as “cert” papers). Denise says, “powerful legal writing is a crucial skill that lawyers must master” and she is committed to helping students perfect this craft. Denise spends one year teaching student fellows the art of critiquing legal writing so they can assist other stu-
students. Last year, 12 trained student writing fellows, most of whom were also teaching assistants, staffed the Writing Center for approximately 30 hours a week. Run on an appointment basis, the Writing Center has both day and evening hours. Students drop off papers one or two days in advance and then return to meet with a writing fellow one-on-one. The Writing Center houses resource books, various writing samples, writing exercises and two computers linked to the Internet.

Joshua Udler, editor of The Raven and now a second-year day student, was among the first students to tap the Writing Center for help with his mock Supreme Court brief for appellate advocacy. He met with writing fellow Sean Brohawn, now a third-year student. Udler says that he “got great feedback from Sean. He was very knowledgeable, had a great deal of experience and was able to provide me with informed, objective criticism.” In each law school course, the faculty member establishes the rules for what type of Writing Center help is acceptable and when assistance crosses the line and becomes an Honor Code violation.

Denise is proud of the Writing Center’s results; she plans to continue using students to teach other students and hopes to build on last year’s “Writing Center Presents . . .” workshop series.

The Student Bar Association (SBA) is a powerful tool available to students for networking with professors. Senior Ryan Palmer III took the helm of the SBA in Spring 1997. Palmer oversees approximately 40 student organizations and sends student representatives to each of the 11 Faculty Council Committees, including six student liaisons on the Teaching and Student Environment Committee. Like Dean Gifford and Professors O’Neill and Hoffmann, Palmer is dedicated to increasing faculty-student interaction. One of the SBA’s goals, he says, is to create a “law school community,” comprised of students, administration, faculty and alumni. Palmer maintains the key to succeeding in law school is finding a niche and excelling in it. To that end, he has found the entire faculty readily accessible to converse in both a personal and professional nature.

In working toward promoting that “law school community,” last year the SBA sponsored Maryland Law with the Orioles at Camden Yards. The event sold out, bringing together some 300 faculty, students and alumni. Palmer was particularly pleased with the faculty turn-out. “This program provided an ideal setting for students to interact and network with both faculty and alumni,” Palmer says. The program was such a success that he plans on making it an annual spring event, along with Ravens and Maryland Golf Classic events.

The SBA is continuing Town Meetings with the Dean. There are two each semester—one luncheon targeting day students and one dinner targeting evening students. Like the “Lunch With the Dean” series, Palmer says these meetings have been an effective way for students to get to know the deans and raise issues of concern with the administration.

Law school in the 1990s is not just about briefing cases and anxiously awaiting to be called on in class. The core of the learning process is interaction between faculty and students. The School of Law’s curriculum is geared toward maximizing the potential for such interaction.

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