

LAW SCHOOL NOTES

U. of I., NU law deans co-teach class

Amar and Rodriguez hope team-up inspires increased partnerships between the schools

BY LAUREN P. DUNCAN
Law Bulletin staff writer

Deans of two Illinois law schools would like to see more partnerships exist between schools, which is why they've decided to team up in working together themselves.

University of Illinois College of Law Dean Vikram David Amar and Northwestern Pritzker School of Law Dean Daniel B. Rodriguez have been co-teaching a course offered to students at both schools. Nine Northwestern students attend the seminar course in person at NU's Streeterville campus, and three U of I students take the course by video feed from Champaign.

The deans established the class with hopes of encouraging interest among other law professors to pursue similar teaching arrangements.

Another goal of co-teaching, they said, is to provide more educational offerings to students by giving them a chance to learn from professors outside their own school.

"A lot of times someone from a school will teach at another school, visit there for a semester or a year, but I think team teaching across schools makes sense and sharing expertise is a good thing in an era where not all law schools are hiring tons of new faculty," Amar said.

Amar typically travels to Chicago from Champaign one day a week for school-related business, which he said made it easy to arrange to co-teach alongside Rodriguez on Mondays.

Amar and Rodriguez met more than 20 years ago, when they were both in the wedding party of a mutual friend. They stayed in touch while working at law schools in California. Amar joined Illinois in 2015 after having been an associate dean at the University of California Davis School of Law, and he previously taught law at UC Hastings, UC Berkeley and UCLA. Rodriguez is a former dean at the University of San Diego Law School and previously taught at UC Berkeley and the University of Southern California.

When Amar moved to Illinois after being selected as dean, he said the thought crossed his mind of co-teaching with Rodriguez. That finally came to fruition this spring when they came together to teach a course on state constitutional law and contemporary public policy. The curriculum is a cross between their two areas of expertise, Amar said.

While they both have experience teaching on the topic of constitutionalism, Amar said his expertise is more focused on federal topics while Rodriguez has a stronger background in state constitutionalism.

The partnership was also inspired in part by the fact that U of I has law students in Chicago. During the final semester of their third year, the law school allows students to take classes at the University of Illinois at Chicago campus. Some of the Chicago offerings are taught via video from Champaign. In-person classes are taught either by local adjuncts or



Daniel B. Rodriguez

by law school faculty who commute to UIC to teach. Currently, U of I has about 25 Chicago-based law students, none of whom are taking the class the deans co-teach.

The co-taught course isn't the first collaboration between Illinois law schools, Amar said. Chicago-based U of I students have the opportunity to take some courses through IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law. He said students from other schools also take short, intensive courses in Champaign.

The idea of co-teaching, though, is different than simply allowing students from another school to gain credit at another institution, the deans said.

The opportunity to learn from more than one perspective — and from school administrators, at that — is the reason why Northwestern third-year student Will Schoenfeld enrolled in the class.

"It's been really interesting ... it's not that deans are usually inaccessible, but taking the opportunity to take a class with them and interact with them at the student-professor level as opposed to the administrator-student level is I think a unique experience," Schoenfeld said.

"I think the biggest benefit [of co-teaching] is the point-counterpoint nature of some of the discussions," he added. "Sometimes I think it can be a little daunting as a student to try to take issue with something that a professor says ... and so with this I think it frees up the discussion a little bit. It promotes debate and better discussion, which is pretty important in the seminar context."

While Amar and Rodriguez aren't sure if they'll teach the same course again next semester, they



Vikram Amar

said they would like their experience to get other professors and schools interested in similar partnerships.

Rodriguez said in his many years of attending meetings with other law school deans, the topic of co-teaching has been discussed often, but then the administrators go their separate ways and nothing happens.

A few reasons why it doesn't happen more often, Rodriguez said, is because of competition between schools and hurdles that some law professors might face in trying to get administrative approval.

Schools need to give incentives to professors to co-teach, Rodriguez said.

"You might ask, why not in Chicago where there are a half-dozen schools isn't there some collaboration? It's a great question, because there are some courses that we offer that [other schools don't]," he said. "It's not as insurmountable as it often seems."

Rodriguez said at the end of the semester he plans to share his experience with faculty and inquire about any interest they might have.

In the meantime, Amar said, he hopes their partnership serves an example that despite the competition that exists between schools, there are opportunities to work together.

"I think it is a good reminder that we're all in this together, and Illinois and Northwestern I think historically have been very supportive of each other ... but I think there's room for a lot of good schools," he said. "And I think it's good for students to be exposed to different points of view."

lduncan@lbpc.com