On January 1, Michael H. Schill became the 14th Dean of the University of Chicago Law School. Dean Schill comes to us from UCLA School of Law, where he served as dean for over five years. Despite once mistakenly referring to legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden as “John Gooden,” Schill was a wildly successful dean at UCLA Law. He recruited leading legal scholars from top schools across the nation, launched three new legal research centers and two academic specialization programs, and doubled fundraising.

“We hit the jackpot with Mike Schill,” said Eric Posner, Kirkland & Ellis Professor of Law and chair of the search committee. “Throughout his scholarly and administrative career, he has always displayed a profound commitment to the intellectual values at the core of the Law School’s mission. At the same time, he’s one of the most talented academic administrators in the country, who has received extraordinary accolades for his leadership, integrity, and devotion to the best in legal education.”

Dean Schill is a nationally known expert on real estate and housing policy and has previously been on the faculty at New York University School of Law and University of Pennsylvania Law School. He has authored three books and more than 40 articles, and is a coauthor of the property law casebook used by more than half of all law students nationwide. Dean Schill is also the first dean of the Law School since the school’s first dean, Joseph Beale, to be appointed from outside the sitting faculty.

Schill is excited to be joining this faculty and eager to get to know alumni and students. “In a world where most law schools converge to a common model, the University of Chicago Law School remains distinctive,” said Schill. “It is an institution singularly committed to intellectual pursuit. Lawyers who have attended the University of Chicago Law School are known throughout the profession for their sheer intellectual horsepower. They are leaders in our profession and in our community.”

During his first month as Dean, Schill sat down with Assistant Dean for Communications Marsha Nagorsky to talk about his intentions and aspirations for his deanship and the future of the University of Chicago Law School.

Before we move on to more serious subjects, how are you adjusting to the weather in Chicago?

Well, I have to say, when my family and friends heard that I was moving from Los Angeles to Chicago in the month of December, several suggested that I see a therapist. And on my first official day as dean, when I walked to school from my apartment on Dorchester Avenue in four-degree weather without a real winter coat, hat, or gloves, anyone passing me by on the street might have agreed. But after augmenting my cold weather wardrobe I am ready for anything Chicago has to throw at me. After all, I grew up in upstate New York and spent the vast majority of my life in the Northeast.

You were dean at UCLA Law School for 5½ years, which is already more time than most deans serve. What made you interested in a second deanship at Chicago?

I loved every moment of my time at UCLA. Like many deans, I frequently got telephone calls from the search committees of other schools asking whether I would be interested. Normally, I just politely said no to the person calling. But when Eric Posner called me on behalf of the dean search committee, I was less dismissive.
What was it about Chicago that made you willing to pursue the deanship?

I was particularly intrigued by both the great legacy of the Law School and its unique culture. Over the past 50 years no law school in the nation has had more of an impact on the world than the University of Chicago Law School.

And I don't mean just that the President of the United States taught here for years. Our school gave birth to the most influential legal theory of my lifetime—law and economics. The work of our faculty—the legends of the past, including Aaron Director, Ronald Coase, and Henry Simons, and our current faculty, including Dick Posner, Bill Landes, Eric Posner, Frank Easterbrook, David Weisbach, and Randy Picker, as well as a whole host of younger stars—fundamentally changed the way in which law is conceived and affected courts, legislatures, and generations of lawyers and legal academics throughout the nation.

Deanships are a bit like relay races. I want to work to make sure that the dean one-half century from now looks back and says that over the previous 50 years Chicago again changed the world more than any other school.

What do you hope to achieve over your term as dean?

While the school is truly extraordinary today, I would not have taken the job to be a caretaker. We can be even better. First, and most importantly, we need to engage the rest of the University more than we do. Law is becoming ever more interdisciplinary. In other words, one can no longer be an excellent lawyer without knowing something about other fields of knowledge, whether they be business, economics, history, or philosophy. Chicago was one of the first law schools in the nation to truly embrace connecting law to other disciplines. Today's faculty is extremely interdisciplinary—over 40 percent have advanced degrees in a field other than law. But our size is small so we need to leverage the extraordinary excellence that is all around us at the university.

Leave it to a real estate lawyer to talk about “leverage.” What do you have in mind?

Well, we should be strongly encouraging our students to take classes across the Midway. Those who are interested should also pursue joint degree programs. And we should find ways to promote active engagement and collaboration between legal scholars and those in other disciplines. Remember the legendary workshops involving Gary Becker, Ronald Coase, Aaron Director, Milton Friedman, Richard Posner, and George Stigler? That is where many of the greatest ideas of law and economics were germinated. We need to re-create linkages between the Law School and other parts of the university, including the humanities and the newly formed Milton Friedman Institute.

In addition to promoting more opportunities for interdisciplinary classes and research, what else are you planning for the school?

One thing I am hoping to do is to grow our faculty. One of the many wonderful things my predecessor Saul Levmore did was build and nurture one of the greatest law faculties in the nation. But our size is small, one of the smallest among elite schools. This small size places tremendous
demands on our faculty to deliver the extraordinary array of classes that our students rightfully expect. Plus, it would be great to have additional scholars to take part in the intellectual life of the school. I also would like to launch a new public-interest law program at the law school. Each year we have a number of students who wish to seek out permanent employment in the nonprofit or governmental sectors. I am already working with a small group of faculty, students, and administrators to put together a program that will provide career advice and mentorship, new curricula and financial support for scholarships, summer fellowships, and loan forgiveness.

How is the school adapting to the recent slowdown in the legal market?

First and foremost we are working hard to make sure that all of our students get the jobs they want. For the most part we are in much better shape than many of our peers. We are a small school with an extremely select student body. Every sensible employer wants to hire at least one Chicago-trained graduate. Nevertheless, despite the fact that we are doing better than our peers, we are working hard to uncover job opportunities for our students as well as coaching them to put their best feet forward in interviews and summer jobs.

Is the Law School doing anything to change its curriculum in response to recent changes in the profession?

Indeed we are. As I go around the country meeting with law firm hiring partners and public sector employers there is a constant desire expressed that law schools do more to teach graduates professional skills such as oral presentation, contract drafting, research, and writing. Everyone agrees that law schools, by and large, do a terrific job teaching analytical skills. Particularly at a school like Chicago, we should maintain and enhance our efforts to sharpen the minds of future lawyers. But today’s employers want students who will be able to get a running start after they graduate. Saul Levmore took important steps to enhance our curriculum in this area by adding new clinics and hiring Associate Dean David Zarfes to focus on creative new offerings in business law that would teach skills. I am

“I want to spend every waking moment making our school better.”
going to make additional investments and have recently hired Joan Neal, an experienced telecommunications attorney, to teach our students intensive contract drafting and analysis.

In the past, most law schools were less interested in “skills training.” Do you think that is changing?

Part of what I am hoping to do is break down the disconnect between the teaching of analytical skills and the teaching of lawyering skills. Perhaps the most difficult intellectual task I have ever taken on was drafting a 100-page real estate contract. I had to understand every element of a sophisticated transaction, think through every permutation of what might happen after the contract was signed, and then protect my client in the document from downside risk. I remember how much I learned and grew from this part of my experience. We can give our students similar experiences here.

We have almost finished our interview and you have not yet mentioned resources. How does fundraising fit into the Law School’s future?

To be honest, there will be no future without greater fundraising. The cost of providing a quality legal education is going up much faster than inflation. Our students are already paying too much in tuition—$46,000 per year—and their debt loads are growing unmanageable. We currently spend much less per student than our peers. To close the gap between what we need to do and what we are currently doing, we need to ramp up fundraising.

What do you mean by “ramp up fundraising”?

I mean over the next few years we will probably need to launch a new campaign. At present, we rank among the top law schools in the nation in alumni giving participation. This reflects the love and gratitude our alumni have for the education they received when they were students. But among the elite law schools, our endowment is one of the smallest and we need every one of our alumni to dig deeper. Folks who currently give $1,000 need to contribute $2,000. I will ask people who give $5,000 to contribute $10,000 and those who donate $100,000 to give $200,000. You get the idea. I know we can double fundraising. We did that at UCLA during my deanship and I know that there is so much goodwill among alumni and friends towards our institution. This is Chicago, and we make no little plans!

Schools are always asking for money. What will your argument be for why people should dig deeper in a period of economic uncertainty?

I understand that some of our alumni are doing less well this year than in years before. But, on the whole, our alumni are doing well, and the skills, relationships, and ideas they developed at Chicago contribute greatly to their continued success. I will ask them to give back to the next generation so that today’s students can have the same benefits and opportunities they had. But even more importantly, I want to inspire our alumni with what we are doing here. We are training the next generation of leaders at the University of Chicago. We are doing the research that will change the law and the world. Contributing to the Law School is not just a gift; it is an investment in the future.

“Every sensible employer wants to hire at least one Chicago-trained graduate.”

developed at Chicago contribute greatly to their continued success. I will ask them to give back to the next generation so that today’s students can have the same benefits and opportunities they had. But even more importantly, I want to inspire our alumni with what we are doing here. We are training the next generation of leaders at the University of Chicago. We are doing the research that will change the law and the world. Contributing to the Law School is not just a gift; it is an investment in the future.

What initiatives are you looking to support with this increased fundraising?

The most important thing we can do is raise money for faculty support and scholarships. We have the hardest-working, most ambitious law faculty in the country. This is not a place where anyone rests on his or her laurels. Productive and creative faculty are always in demand elsewhere. We need to retain our rising and established stars and enable them to flourish. And we need more than ever to fund student scholarships. Neither of my parents went to college yet I was fortunate enough to go to Princeton and Yale. I know how important scholarships are.
Are you planning to teach?

Yes. Absolutely. Next year I think I will teach either Property or a class in higher education law and policy. Plus, I would love to offer a Greenberg seminar. But I won’t serve the students home-cooked food like Professors Ben-Shahar and Baird. I don’t cook … indeed, I never turned on my oven in over five years in Los Angeles. But I love Chinese take-out.

Before we end the interview, our readers no doubt want to know something about you. What do you do in your spare time?

First your question assumes I have spare time. Seriously, I like to go to movies, read books, and watch high-quality television shows such as 24, Damages, Mad Men, and Law and Order. I am a TiVo fanatic and have four of them in my apartment. In fact, this year I was recruited to be a beta tester for the company. Finally, I love shopping for books. Indeed, this is one of the reasons I decided to live in Hyde Park. It has the best book shopping of any neighborhood in the country. On any weekend, don’t be surprised to see me in the Seminary Bookstore. You probably won’t find me in the gym, though. The words of the great Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins apply equally well to me: “Whenever I feel the need to exercise, I lie down until it goes away.”

So we should believe the rumor that says that your nickname at UCLA was the Energizer Dean?

Well, some alumni used to call me that. I do tend to work a lot, but, to be truthful, it is hardly work. I love what I do and I believe in the mission of the University of Chicago. How could someone not be energetic when they are the dean of such a great school? I want to spend every waking moment making our school better.