The motto of the University of Chicago is “Crescat Scientia; Vita Excolatur,” which is usually translated as “Let knowledge grow from more to more; and so be human life enriched.” When Michael Schill arrived in 2010 to become the fourteenth dean of the University of Chicago Law School, the first “more” was already well-settled—more than a century in the making. The question was what Schill would do with the rest of the sentence. Schill’s announced plan for the Law School was to go from strength to strength: to make everything good about the Law School even better, and to improve upon its enrichment of human life as well.

Drawn to the Law School by its unique culture and storied history, Schill—whose tenure as dean ended earlier this year when he departed to become president of the University of Oregon—declared his intent to improve upon excellence in his first interview as dean: “While the school is truly extraordinary today, I would not have taken the job to be a caretaker,” he said. “We can be even better.” He stated his intention to increase the school’s interdisciplinary character and more fully engage with the rest of the University, to grow training in leadership and business law, to increase the size of the faculty while maintaining or even improving its quality, to substantially expand existing programs in law and economics and in public service, and to dramatically improve financial aid and scholarships. “I want to spend every waking moment working to make our school better,” he said.

Underlying all of Schill’s goals was an indefatigable commitment to getting to know the Law School’s graduates and asking for their support. It became a hallmark that he would do anything to build relationships with alumni. He once attended a concert of the jam band Widespread Panic at a donor’s request—and went out and purchased jeans for the occasion after his staff told him that his version of casual attire (“suit with no tie”) wouldn’t work.

Jonathan Masur, the John P. Wilson Professor of Law and David and Celia Hilliard Research Scholar who also served as one of Schill’s deputy deans, reports from first-
from one of our most successful graduates—a gift for which [former dean] Saul Levmore deserves a great deal of credit—has allowed us to attract the brightest students in the nation to Chicago. They’re amazing students, just amazing; and they’re going to be great leaders in all segments of society.”

Several additional full-tuition scholarships were funded by generous donors, and overall, financial aid for students was tripled during Schill’s term, with an increase of more than 50 percent in the number of students receiving aid.

Support for students pursuing public service was a high priority for Schill, and his tenure saw significant advances on that front. A full-tuition scholarship is now awarded each year to a student who has demonstrated a commitment to public-interest law. Another donor-funded program enables students to undertake public-interest summer projects around the world, and there are now one-year fellowships for Law School graduates considering long-term public-interest careers. Other improvements in the past five years include the strengthening of the Loan Repayment Assistance Program, the addition of the first full-time staff position focused solely on public-interest and public-service programs, and the introduction of the Pro Bono Service Initiative, through which students pledge to volunteer a minimum of 50 hours of law-related service during their time at the Law School.

Schill’s support for students, unfortunately, sometimes had to extend to the most difficult of circumstances. Several times during Schill’s deanship, tragedy struck the Law School when students were seriously injured or passed away. Schill’s warmth was evident. “Among the many things Mike Schill did so well was his ability to be himself and yet represent us and all that we aspire to be.

Support for Students in Many Ways

Of all the gifts received during his deanship, Schill says that the twenty full-tuition scholarships per year that were first funded in 2010 by David Rubenstein, ’73, have had a particularly far-reaching impact: “That wonderful gift
Attracting faculty was also made possible by Schill’s individual attention to each professor, building on the Law School’s long-standing reputation as a community where faculty can truly thrive. Martha Nussbaum, the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, says, “I particularly admire him for his ability to listen to each faculty member and to offer warm and personal support for our work.”

In the classroom, the Law School has always struck a curricular balance between a core of classical legal education and a response to changing times in the legal profession. Schill’s deanship saw developments on both fronts. He focused early in his deanship on elevating one of the Law School’s historical strengths: “This is the school that created Law and Economics, the most important interdisciplinary theory of law of the past seventy-five years, so one very important initiative while I was dean was to add even more energy to the study and application of Law and Economics,” Schill says. A $10 million gift endowed the Coase-Sandor Institute for Law and Economics, and an additional gift allowed for an interdisciplinary housing-focused program related to the

Chicago, and Then Some

By the end of Schill’s term there were more faculty members than when it began, though not quite as many as he had intended. With Schill’s departure from the faculty, where he served as Harry N. Wyatt Professor of Law, there are now 38 faculty positions, up from 35 but two short of his goal of 40. “I missed that one by a little,” he says, “but I’m sure it will be reached soon, and the quality of the faculty that we have attracted—and, just as importantly, the quality of the faculty we have retained—is unmatched. The increase in faculty diversity that we achieved is something that we all care about. Chicago’s historic reputation for great scholarship and great teaching is in excellent shape.”

Schill enjoys the company of his faculty colleagues, including Lior Strahilevitz, at a going-away dinner in his honor.
Institute. The Institute also established a new joint JD/PhD program in Law and Economics and created the Globalizing Law and Economics Initiative, which seeks to transform the legal systems of other nations with the insights of Law and Economics.

Recent years have also seen the introduction of many other interdisciplinary initiatives and strengthened relationships with many of the University’s academic departments. The Law School created a one-year Masters in Law degree to permit doctoral students from any discipline, from inside or outside the University, to include the law within their studies.

A comprehensive business-related curriculum took shape with the 2013 launch of the Doctoroff Business Leadership Program. The program provides an expansive array of intense business courses—taught by Booth School of Business faculty members—for all students, and for some students who are committed to careers in business there are also opportunities for mentorship, internships, and other enrichment opportunities not normally found in law schools. Donors also financed a full professorship and two visiting professorships focused on business law.

Business-related programming will be further reinforced by the presence of a clinical fellow who supervises law students interested in start-ups and other entrepreneurial activity, and by the Kirkland & Ellis Corporate Lab, a clinical program in which students work directly with legal and business leaders at household-name companies.

At the annual Kirkland & Ellis Scholars Reception after graduation, Schill always delighted in toasting the new graduates.
More Clinics, Even More Practical Skills Training

Schill saw one of his responsibilities as “eliminating any disconnect between the teaching of analytical skills and the teaching of lawyering skills, so that Chicago students, who are the most brilliant and energized students of any law school anywhere, are also the most effective, no matter what they choose to do.”

Clinics are one way to accomplish that, and in addition to the Corporate Lab, four other new clinics—the Abrams Environmental Law Clinic, the International Human Rights Clinic, the Gendered Violence and the Law Clinic, and the Prosecution and Defense Clinic—were begun during Schill’s tenure. With those new clinics and the expansion of others, for the first time in the Law School’s history enough space is available for any student who wants to participate in a clinical experience.

Practical skills are conveyed through other new programming as well. Schill acknowledges that he was apprehensive when an early practical-skills initiative, the Keystone Professionalism and Leadership Program, was presented to the Visiting Committee in 2012: “I half-expected that our alumni would roll their eyes and say that focusing on what some call ‘soft skills’ was not appropriate for a school like the University of Chicago. To my surprise, however, the idea of a leadership initiative resonated deeply with our alumni.” That endorsement of Keystone led to its continuing evolution, and today it offers more than 70 opportunities each year for students to learn pragmatic skills in written and oral communication, professional judgment, interpersonal skills, and career building, among other areas.

In 2013, the Law School took a much bolder step, joining with the Booth School of Business to adapt Booth’s highly regarded leadership training program to law students, as the Kapnick Leadership Development Initiative. Further financial support has now made it possible to present leadership training to all first-year students during orientation. The Kapnick program is the first of its kind at a top law school and is already showing dividends for the first class to participate. Other law schools regularly inquire about Kapnick in hopes of replicating it.

Practical contract-drafting skills have been taught at the Law School since early in Schill’s tenure, when he brought on an experienced attorney to handle that responsibility, and an endowed lectureship provides another source of pragmatic learning. As the lectureship’s donor, Steven Feirson, ’75, has described it: “My goal was to add the seasoning of real-world experience and perspective to the Law School’s superb scholarly tradition.” Students considering academic careers gained an additional opportunity to immerse themselves deeply in the kind of scholarly work that is the hallmark of law professors through the new yearlong class, Canonical Ideas in American Legal Thought.

The Long Run

Just as he led enduring change at the Law School, Schill says that he was personally changed during his tenure: “I became a Chicagoan. I came to the institution really being quite different—I came from NYU, which is definitely not Chicago, and then I came from UCLA, which is most assuredly not Chicago. I like to think that at least in some ways I came to embody and articulate the virtues of this unique and extraordinary law school.”

He expects to remain a Chicagoan. “I want to stay a part of the lives of those I have connected with here, and I want them to stay a part of my life,” he says. “I think that a dean has a role to play even after leaving the institution,
and I hope to be able to play that role; I hope to be invited back for events and I hope to be able to come to a number of them.” He’ll be in Chicago regularly—about once a month, he expects—because his parents and sister, with whom he is very close, continue to live here.

When Brian Leiter, the Karl N. Llewellyn Professor of Jurisprudence, reported the dean’s impending departure at his blog, he wrote: “It breaks my heart to have to post this, since Mike Schill has been a terrific dean here the last five and a half years. … I know I speak for everyone at Chicago in saying that Mike Schill will be greatly missed.”

Missed he will be, and it’s plain that he will miss Chicago, too. It is already evident that Michael Schill has established an important legacy. His successor, Geoffrey Stone, ’71, the Edward H. Levi Distinguished Service Professor of Law who is now serving as interim dean, views Schill’s influence through the lens of more than forty-five years as a student, faculty member, former dean, and University administrator. “The Law School today is in the best shape that it’s been in my entire time here,” Stone says. “As much as I am proud of what the Law School has accomplished in the past, I’m even more proud of what it’s accomplishing in the present and what I know it will do in the future.”

As knowledge has grown from more to more in the past five-plus years, and life has been enriched both inside and outside the Law School, so will the next deans take up the challenge to continue making an exceptional institution even more exceptional. “This was a great law school the day I came here,” Schill says. “I would like to think that I’ve left it a better place. Deanships are a bit like relay races, and I hope that the dean a half-century from now looks back and says that over the previous fifty years Chicago again changed the world more than any other school.”

“The Once and Interim Dean”

Geoffrey Stone, ’71, the Edward H. Levi Distinguished Service Professor of Law, is serving as interim dean of the Law School, as a search committee seeks a more permanent replacement.


In an interview, he shared his thoughts about the nature of his responsibilities as interim dean:

“I have deep commitment to this institution, and a profound admiration for its values and culture. In undertaking this responsibility, my goal is to preserve and protect those values and that culture.

“The Law School today is in the best shape that it’s been in my entire time here in terms of the intellectual culture of the institution, the educational experience for our students, the engagement and productivity of our faculty, and the overall quality of the student experience.

“Michael Schill has made a great contribution, and we all stand on the shoulders of those who made this institution what it is, people like Edward Levi, Gerhard Casper, and Phil Neal, along with generations of faculty and students, and especially alumni who have supported the institution and made possible the remarkable culture that now exists.

“I am looking forward to this opportunity to serve this place that has meant so much to me, and to so many.”