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John Marshall Dean Corkery says farewell, for now

After a decade leading Chicago law school, highly visible leader talks about next steps

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After more than 10 years of serving at the helm of The John Marshall Law School, Dean John E. Corkery will leave his post as the school's top administrator next week before going on sabbatical.

Although Corkery is tentatively planning on returning to the school in the future to teach, he offered some reflections on his 43-year career as a faculty member and administrator at John Marshall before he passes the torch to incoming dean Darby Dickerson, who starts on Jan. 1.

The following interview has been edited for brevity.

Law Bulletin: After growing up in St. Louis, you attended law school at Northwestern University School of Law and then worked at Lord, Bissell and Brook for five years prior to joining JMLS. Why did you switch to academics?

Corkery: You know, Lord, Bissell was good, I still have good friends there, but I thought I might like to do something that to me was more fun, I thought there was something out there that would be more fun, and I was right.

LB: At the time, did you ever imagine you'd be at the school for more than four decades?

Corkery: I never really thought that much about it ... I'd been having a good time, and it was so nice to come over here and actually be paid for something which I really liked to do.

LB: You took your first leadership role in 1998 as associate dean for academic affairs before becoming vice dean in 2004, acting dean in 2005 and dean in 2007. What do you think is your legacy as an administrator?

Corkery: I think others determine what a legacy is, but I've been very pleased, with among other things, the fact that we have a very strong faculty that in the past five years we've been able to get the school to a size that will be sustainable for the near future in light of the decline in the number of students that we and almost any law school in the country have had.

LB: When you started as acting dean in 2005, one of your goals was to grow the faculty.

Corkery: One of the reasons for that was the [American Bar Association] had a rule that specified student-faculty ratio, and the lower the ratio the better. The rule was you had to be 21 or less, and we were always there, but we thought to be a better school we would hire more people and reduce the ratio, and we did, and that was fine, but then among other things the ABA did away with that rule, and we had a lot of faculty and things were fine, but then in about 2012 we realized, uh oh, we're going to have to change the size of our school.

So in a way, almost the first 6½ years of when I was dean was being dean in a time of abundance, and the last 6½ years was being dean in a time of scarcity.



John E. Corkery

LB: Did you have to change your approach to leadership during those changing times?

Corkery: We had some operational issues that we had to address. So, about five or four years ago, we started what we called the dean's advisory group on operational issues, and that helped us make a lot of decisions about size of staff and other things, and as to size of faculty, our board provided some funds to offer faculty voluntary retirement programs and a number of them took them.

LB: Another major undertaking during your time as dean has been expanding and renovating the school by purchasing an additional building, renovating the school's existing facilities and expanding into the space where a Walgreens store formerly leased from the school on State Street. What was that experience like?

One of the most enjoyable times to me was when we were rehabbing the school and building student commons ...

Corkery: One of the most enjoyable times to me was when we were rehabbing the school and building student commons and then rehabbing and redoing 19 W. Jackson. We owned this building, the 300 S. State building, and we had been trying for years to try to buy the building in between our two buildings. The law school decided, well, OK, that's not going to happen, so let's decide to put our money into re-

habbing 300 S. State.

Shortly after that, we get a phone call from the owners of the building saying, you know what, I think we're ready to sell that building to you.

So then, if you're a school and you get a chance to buy a building between two other buildings you own, you have to. Our board was great and they decided to do that and plans were drawn, and so it suddenly became a much bigger undertaking, but a wonderful undertaking.

It turned out to be a really good decision, and even at the time it was done, because I don't think things started until about 2010 or 2011, everyone knew, yes, we're going into a recession or we could be, but the thought was that we might as well do this now because when we come out we're going to be much better positioned to compete with the other schools we compete with. I think that has turned out to be right.

LB: That project took about three years to finish. What do you hope students and faculty got out of it?

Corkery: Well, we wanted to improve the student experience and to make it better. A more pleasant, a more open, a more modern experience, and I think with this style of architecture, we succeeded. And after we finished, I think it's clear we are no longer the law school over the drugstore.

LB: You mentioned competition. Has the law school environment always been as competitive as it is today?

Corkery: Of course we had always competed for students and other things, but in times of abundance it just wasn't such an issue, there wasn't a focus on it. Once you get into an area of scarcity, then you begin to look around and say oh my goodness, we are really competing for students and we want to do the best job we can.

LB: There have been many programs and clinics launch or expand under your watch at John Marshall, including the establishment of the Veterans Legal Support Center & Clinic that opened in 2008. How did that come about?

Corkery: One day I was sitting peaceably in my office and three students appeared at my door and said dean, we really think — I think they were all in the armed forces or the reserves — we think we really need a veterans clinic ... I said, oh boy, fellas, money's tight, but if you could go out and find some funding for it that would be a really big help.

I thought, well, I'll never see them again. But, about a month later, same people come back and they say, guess what, we found a grant of about \$100,000 from the [Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs] ... and then I knew they had me.

We went forward with it and I think we were one of the first schools to have a veterans clinic,

and it's done very well ever since then. Our clinic has connections with and has helped other law schools start veterans clinic around the country.

LB: Going forward, what changes would you predict are in store for John Marshall?

Corkery: We've had to make some changes over the last four or five years to get the school to be a right size for this market, and we think we are in a sustainable position, so that part is really good for us. And my guess is we will continue to improve the experience of our students to make it better, make sure they get the jobs, and to provide them with just a terrific legal education. Now one thing, and it's pretty much true in the law school

area, there have not been too many full-time faculty hires over the last four or five years, but I think going forward now that hiring is going to start.

LB: Do you feel like you're leaving the school in a good place?

Corkery: Times have changed. One of the keys to success is to be able to adapt in a good way to those changes and be resilient in the way you pursue your goals.

I feel like the school is in pretty good shape, but it could always be better. That's the thing, you can never stay still. You always have to improve, because the market's changed. And not only has the market changed, but the profession has changed ... There's much more pressure on the law school to make sure our

students can practice in this market and have the skills to do so.

LB: What are you going to do after your last day here next Friday?

Corkery: One of the things I've decided to do is not plan. I'm going to take a break from planning.

LB: Looking back at the past 43 years, what do you think of your career at John Marshall?

Corkery: It's been a lot of fun ... to me that's a pretty good thing. The goal, I think, to me and to anybody is to find something you like to do and see if you can get somebody to pay you money for doing it.

I have no complaints. I am a happy camper.