Professor Steven Homer Featured in Study of Best Law Teachers

A new book names Steven Homer, Interim Director of the Legal Analysis and Communications Program, recipient of the University of New Mexico’s Outstanding Adjunct/Lecturer of the Year award and a multiple-time winner of Dean’s Awards for Faculty Excellence at the University of New Mexico School of Law, one of only 26 “best law teachers” in the United States.

The book, What the Best Law Teachers Do (Harvard University Press, 2013), is the culmination of a four-year study to identify extraordinary law teachers who have had a significant, positive and long-term impact on their students. After receiving hundreds of nominations, the authors selected 26 subjects to profile. They visited all of the subjects over multiple days, observed class sessions, and conducted lengthy interviews with the subjects, students, alumni, deans, and other faculty.

The book studies the attributes and practices of these law professors, described as “inspiring role models to their students, who consciously and carefully prepare their students to practice law, who devote themselves to helping their students grow as people and as future lawyers, and who mentor their students, helping them find jobs and make career choices, even long after the students have graduated.”

With Homer, everyone participates

Homer teaches first and second year students and has taught in the School’s Clinic program for third year students. He insists that everyone must participate in class. “Speaking in front of people is very important for a lawyer,” Homer says, so he calls on each of his students every day. He acknowledges it's stressful at first but says that as time goes on the students become more comfortable with it.

The book identifies structure as key in the classroom; that students repeatedly say they appreciate having a structure that helps them learn. Homer scripts his whole class to ensure that each class is productive. He organizes the content, develops the sequence of questions, and anticipates the answers. He says part of his job is to keep students on task. His students commented on how clear his expectations are and how important they are to
gauge progress.

One of the lasting lessons for Homer's students is thoughtful writing. Students are quoted discussing the link between careful reading and persuasive writing, focusing on the purpose in writing, and the importance of editing. One former student said those practices have been ingrained and when people in the office pass motions around before filing them, they actually say “do the Homer thing” -- chop out extraneous verbiage.

The book is authored by Professor Gerry Hess of Gonzaga University School of Law, Professor Sophie Sparrow of the University of New Hampshire School of Law, and Michael Hunter Schwartz, dean and professor of law at the UALR William H. Bowen School of Law.

According to Hess, “All of the teachers we studied are regarded as being among the most rigorous professors at their law schools who have high expectations of every student, yet they also are known for their kindness to their students. They foster self-confidence in their students and inspire in them a belief that they are capable of great things. They get to know their students as people and manifest caring and respect for their students. These teachers model hard work, creativity, and humility.”

About the University of New Mexico School of Law
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