

Wilkes finds promise in new law school



FOUR YEARS ago, as part of its annual strategic plan update, Wilkes University's Board of

Trustees considered the option of opening a law school in Northeastern Pennsylvania. A bold step, because there are significant risks in such an undertaking.

But Wilkes has a history of founding programs that are much needed for the region's economic development.

Consider, for instance, the creation of its division of engineering, the Nesbitt College of Pharmacy and Nursing, the purchase of the former Call Center, and the partnership with King's College to operate a Barnes & Noble bookstore in downtown Wilkes-Barre.

All of these endeavors had risks but ended up being wins for everyone – the city, region, students and the university – and they are wonderful examples of the ways a university can and should serve its community. The proposed Wilkes Law School Planning Initiative emerged from this same philosophy that asks: What do students and the region need to continue to prosper?

After considering the law school option, the board of trustees asked the administration to appoint an ad hoc committee and charged it with the responsibility for studying the idea. This committee looked carefully at the need for a law school in the region,

COMMENTARY

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profession and the unique contribution Wilkes University might make to legal education, given its historical commitment to and expertise in student mentoring.

The committee's recommendation to continue studying the initiative led to a nationwide search for a dean of the Wilkes Law School Planning Initiative, which concluded when I accepted the position. This is an extraordinary opportunity and a challenge I look forward to meeting.

The idea of starting a law school in Northeastern Pennsylvania comes at the right time for legal education. Debate over the future of legal education began in earnest with the release by the American Bar Association in 1992 of the McCrate Report, a document that urged the creation of clinical programs at all ABA-accredited law schools in the interest of enhancing skills training among future members of the legal profession.

Discussion over other issues of importance to legal education crystallized one year ago with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's release of "Educating Lawyers: Preparation for the Profession of Law" – a volume that praises what legal education does very well and offers suggestions on how legal edu-

A new law school – particularly one that is not located at large research university and therefore bound by the cultural imperatives of such an institution – is uniquely suited to address the challenges presented by the Carnegie report.

Why Wilkes?

Because it has proven to be an institution that embraces this kind of challenge – an institution that is willing to take calculated risks for the betterment of its students and its community.

Certainly, creation of the highly successful Nesbitt College of Pharmacy and Nursing 12 years ago serves as proof of what Wilkes can do with a new idea and how the region can benefit.

Similar initiatives like the creation of the Jay Sidhu School of Business and Leadership and the Sovereign Center, and participation by Wilkes in the Joint Urban Studies Center, are further evidence of how a university can help a region.

The idea of a law school in NEPA – one at Wilkes University – is an idea with great promise. It is now time to begin the hard work of determining whether that idea can be turned into a reality.

Those with an interest in the Wilkes Law School Planning Initiative are invited to follow its progress on the initiative's Web site. The address is www.law.wilkes.edu.

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