New Law School Deans Aim for Diversity

Incoming DU and CU deans discuss the importance of diversity among law students

BY SARAH GREEN

Although the number of racial minorities and women pursuing a legal education is increasing in the U.S., the percentage of law students with diverse backgrounds who graduate from law school, and ultimately obtain high-ranking positions in law firms, is still significantly low. According to a study conducted by the American Bar Association, “diversity is widely embraced in principle within the legal profession but seldom realized in practice.”

Thus, women and racial minorities have become grossly underrepresented at the top. Consequently, law continues to be one of the least diverse professions in the U.S.

Bruce Smith, who recently took over as dean of the University of Denver Sturm College of Law, said he feels there is still a lack of diversity among law students, despite accomplishments that have been made over that past few decades.

“In some ways, the field of law has been responsible for breaking down barriers to educational access, perhaps most notably in Brown v. Board (of Education), but the revolution, if we wish to call it that, is significantly incomplete,” he said.

Smith currently serves on several educational, civic and corporate boards, including the board of advisors of the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System as well as the board of directors of the Center for Legal Inclusiveness, giving him a platform to discuss the importance of inclusivity and diversity within the field of law.

“The legal profession needs to be as inclusive as the population it serves,” he said. According to the American Bar Association, there are two professions less diverse than the legal field — dentistry and natural sciences.

“So, medicine, architecture, engineering, accounting, all of those professional fields do considerably better than the field of law, which is profoundly disappointing,” Smith said.

Although more women, African Americans, Native Americans and other minorities are graduating from law school than ever before, there is still a significant diversity gap that exists for minorities who work in law firms.

“About 20 percent of current law graduates are from those historically underrepresented minority groups. But only 7 percent of minorities are law firm partners and only 9 percent of minorities serve as general counsel within Fortune 500 companies,” he said.

Smith said that “pointing the finger at the legal profession” is not the answer. Solving the lack of diversity among lawyers and other legal professionals begins with law schools. He said diversity will expand when one key issue that makes any professional field a challenge for minorities is addressed accessibility.

“Attention to diversity is important because we want to be inclusive,” Anaya said. “Overall ethnic minorities have not had the same opportunities as others, and that’s just a fact.”

As the incoming dean at CU, Anaya said that he hopes to increase diversity and representative network of legal professionals to adequately serve all of society.

“We need an inclusive, empathetic and representative network of legal professionals to adequately serve all of society,” Anaya said. “I see law and legal education as part of an international arena of learning.”

Anaya’s life work has been the research and focus of international human rights, specifically issues concerning indigenous peoples, earning him a nomination for a Nobel Peace Prize. But more importantly, it has allowed him to examine the legal field through the lens of diversity, or lack thereof.

“I want to empower the faculty and students to do the best they can,” he said. “One must look at the law through a lens of empathy and inclusiveness, and that starts in part with having a diverse student body.” •

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James Anaya, CU Law School Dean

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THE LAW SCHOOLS AT DU AND CU (PICTURED) HAVE AN EMPHASIS ON DIVERSITY TO ADDRESS THE LACK THEREOF IN THE PROFESSION.

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PHOTO: LAW WEEK FILE

I'm concerned about ensuring diversity within the student body and the faculty ranks,” he said. “Attention to positions in that respect.”

However, Smith is not alone in this fight for diversity and inclusiveness in law schools. James Anaya, who starts his deanship at the University of Colorado Law School today, tackles this issue as well, with both enthusiasm and soliciude.

“I’m concerned about ensuring diversity within the student body and the faculty ranks,” he said. “Attention to