Tomorrow's Lawyers

New classes and new facilities prepare SU's College of Law for the future.

by Alix Mitchell

For the past year, everyone in the campus community could see that the College of Law was changing. White Hall swarmed with construction workers intent on creating a new law library and transforming the old one into much needed additional classroom and office space.

The $4.5-million project was completed this fall, and during a March 22 dedication ceremony the structure was christened the H. Douglas Barclay Law Library. The modern, four-level building brings a highly visible change to the college.

Impressive as it is, however, the new library is just one of several recent developments that has transformed the College of Law into one of the most technologically and academically advanced in the country.

During the last five years, the college has developed an innovative new curriculum, created a nearly infinite variety of interdisciplinary degree programs, and installed a mind-boggling computer system that provides extensive computer access to students, faculty, and administrators.

The first of these changes came in 1980, when the college instituted its Major Program Areas Curriculum (MPAC). The plan allows each student to choose one of four major program areas: business organizations and transactions; civil and criminal justice; government and regulation; or international.

Each MPAC is studied in depth through core courses, a sequence of advanced courses, a year-long writing project, and a year-long colloquium.

Craig Christensen, who joined the college as dean in 1975, explains that MPAC was the college's answer to a growing national concern over the traditional method of teaching law. "MPAC put the Syracuse University College of Law at the forefront of a national trend to give legal education greater structure," says Christensen.

"The modern American law school was born in the late 19th century when Christopher Columbus Langdell invented the case method that broke the law down into a science," he explains. "But after the Depression, a whole new body of law grew up, and, necessarily, legal education changed. "The case method courses were still being taught the first year, but the tendency during the second and third year was to offer a smorgasbord of electives to deal with a growing body of law," Christensen explains.

A growing reform movement peaked in the late 1970s, and the SU College of Law, in creating MPAC, was one of its leaders. "We decided that a good legal education requires that a student study an area in depth, and that study also be interdisciplinary," Christensen says. Whichever MPAC students choose, they are likely to take several interdisciplinary courses along the way. Some are taught by other college, while others are taught by law college professors with interdisciplinary training.

In addition, students also may enroll in any of 18 formally recognized interdisciplinary programs, or create their own.

Christensen hastens to point out that the new curriculum still incorporates the college's traditional emphasis on courtroom practices. When MPAC was created, he explains, seven "lawyering skills" programs were included, ranging from an introductory course to the Moot Court Program.

The results have been spectacular. To date, the college's moot court teams have won three national championships, seven northeast regional championships, three best-advocate-in-the-nation awards, and one runner-up prize in trial competitions. The college has also garnered other national awards in appellate, minority student, and tax moot court competitions. These achievements have led the New York State Bar Association to cite the college as the best trial skills law school in the state in 1977, 1978, 1979, 1982, 1983, and 1984.

The moot courtroom successes, along with the new curriculum and interdisciplinary opportunities, have given the college an outstanding reputation. "It's clear to me when I go out on the recruiting trail," says Jane Rogers, assistant dean for admissions, "that pre-law advisors have talked to students about our college, because the students I meet out there know quite a bit about us and what we have to offer."

The college's growing reputation as an innovator is also the result of a major expansion and renovation...
of facilities. The project created the new library, converted the old library space into new offices and classrooms to accommodate the college’s 650 students, and incorporated a $600,000 computer system.

At the center of the newly renovated college is the central processing computer room, where the VS100—the main computer—is housed. Emanating from the VS100 is a network of cables, called a WANGNET, which reaches ports in virtually every office in the college. These ports allow virtually every administrator, secretary, and faculty member to have access to the system.

Currently, 40 terminals are connected to the system, and 29 more will be hooked up by June 1986. From any terminal, a user with the proper security clearance can gain access to an astonishing range of information: the college’s data banks stored in the VS100; catalog information for the entire University library system; the University’s central computer system; and WESTLAW, the national law research center. In addition the terminals can function independently as word processors.

“This system allows us to capture the best of both worlds,” Christensen says. “We can have stand-alone personal computers at various locations, but for a big project that needs a mainframe, the personal computer can hook up to it. I believe our system is a prototype for systems that will become common in the University over the next 20 years.”

The system will allow the college to run much more smoothly on every level, Christensen says. Students and faculty will be able to write and edit on word processors, access the national law research center WESTLAW, and have electronic access to both the law library and other University libraries. In addition, faculty will send internal memos and schedule meetings through the computer. Administrators will use their terminals for word processing, course scheduling, and budget management, as well as for maintaining records and preparing transcripts.

The computer system extends to the new library, of course, which houses a word-processing room and a computerized legal research room; together the rooms will accommodate 17 people.

“We have come from Sleepy Hollow land to the land of sophisticated information transfer,” says Thomas Kingsley, professor of law and director of the library.

The library has also grown in other, equally significant, ways. To begin with, the new structure, attached to E.I. White Hall by a glass atrium, has been designed to house 200,000 volumes and can expand to hold 240,000—twice the maximum capacity of the old library.

With so much more room available, a great deal of attention is being given to controlled, systematic growth. Last year, an acquisitions director and three other staff members were added, and the acquisitions budget was increased to $450,000. Five years ago it was $70,000.

“Now that we have a larger budget and a full-time acquisitions director for the first time,” says Kingsley, “we can assess the strengths and weaknesses of the library, while collecting volumes to remedy its weaknesses. For instance, with our early American law and legal history collection, we’ve been able to acquire the early legislature sessions laws from all the states, which significantly enhances the ability to research the ways various laws have developed. Similar emphasis has been given to building up such areas as international law, foreign and comparative law, environmental law, and government and regulation,” he says.

Building a strong library such as this is essential to the success of the college, according to Kingsley.

“Because of the nature of law and the fact that it changes every day with new decisions, statutes, and legislation, the law cannot be studied with textbooks alone,” Kingsley says. “There has to be a place where students and faculty can be apprised of developments within the law and the impact of these developments.

“The law library is the very heart of the law school, and ours is competitive with all the major law school libraries,” Kingsley says. “It has truly come of age.”

And so, it seems, has the college.