



Update to Strategic Plan

Fall 2019



Western
Law

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This document should be read as an interim update to *Achieving Excellence on the World Stage*, the Strategic Plan released in early 2014. Both documents express our commitment to providing a rigorous legal education in a research-intensive environment. We aim to promote an enriching, inclusive, and dynamic atmosphere in which critical and creative thinking can thrive, and to be a destination of choice for faculty and students with diverse experiences and perspectives.

The smallest of Ontario's longstanding law schools, Western Law is known for its close-knit student community and for the development of meaningful connections between individual students and professors. Our learning environment is fostered by Western's idyllic campus in London's historic Old North community, a location that encourages students to immerse themselves in the study of law. We also benefit from London's strong legal community, which actively supports our academic and co-curricular programming, and from our close proximity to Toronto's legal and financial centres.

We are committed to the following three broad strategic priorities:

1. Attracting excellent JD candidates with a range of perspectives and experiences, and reducing unwarranted barriers to access;
2. Offering an academically rigorous and relevant legal education in an atmosphere that promotes informed, critical and collegial debate;
3. Producing outstanding scholarship that engages the academy, profession, policy-makers, and society.

Our Changing Context

Since 2014, the context in which we offer legal education has changed in several significant ways.

Reconciliation: In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission published its reports and Calls to Action, which include a call for law schools to introduce mandatory curriculum "on Aboriginal people and the law", and has fostered reflective conversations about the process of reconciliation in legal education and legal practice.

Technology: Within the profession, lawyers are adopting technology and artificial intelligence to enhance their practices. This means that lawyers will have additional time to perform more sophisticated and creative thinking in serving their clients. Technological developments will also open new opportunities for lawyers and other professionals to provide legal services in non-traditional formats. We believe that our students will be best prepared for these changes by a legal education that fosters creativity, deep thinking, and informed problem solving.

Competition: We are working in an increasingly competitive environment. Ryerson University is set to open Ontario's eighth law school in 2020, and will offer an Integrated Practice Curriculum that exempts their students from the articling requirement. Further, we are operating in a time both of fiscal restraint and of increasing oversight and control by the provincial government and the Federation of Law Societies of Canada. This context makes it all the more important for us to differentiate ourselves, highlight our unique strengths, and provide independent sources of support for our priorities.

Western Law is well-positioned to take on these challenges. We are in an exciting period of faculty renewal, with one-quarter of our faculty being appointed since 2018. This has increased our range of scholarly perspectives and methodologies, encouraged us to reflect on our vision, and provided a solid foundation on which to build the Faculty's future.

Priority Implementation

Priority 1: Attracting excellent JD candidates with a range of perspectives and experiences

Since 2014, we have:

- Introduced a Dean of Law Scholarship program for the top applicants to Western Law, devoting \$300,000 annually for this purpose.
- Implemented a publicly-available Diversity Survey for our incoming class, beginning in 2017.
- Instituted a Professional Induction Ceremony and developed Orientation Week programming related to professionalism, anti-harassment, diversity and inclusion, and respectful debate.
- Provided a range of student wellness initiatives, including a Mindfulness program for first-year students and a full-time, embedded Student Wellness Counsellor.
- Held an annual free LSAT-preparation course for Indigenous and low-income candidates.
- Increased our high school outreach through "High School Law Days," the Ontario Justice Education Network, mock trial coaching, and participation in the Western Engineering Summer Academy.

Looking ahead, we will:

- Make bursaries and scholarships a fundraising priority.
- Assess the results of our Diversity Survey and identify areas that could benefit from new approaches and outreach.
- Enhance and support the diversity of our student body.
- Review the accessibility of our physical space.
- Maintain a robust Careers and Professional Development Office, encouraging students to explore career paths in private practice, government, business, and the non-profit sector, as well as judicial clerkships and further academic study.
- Expand our high school outreach in Southwestern Ontario, including in local First Nations communities.

Priority 2: Offering an academically rigorous and relevant legal education

Since 2014, we have:

- Continued to prioritize our signature Small Group program, which is fundamental to the first-year experience at Western Law.
- Increased our Writing Requirements and introduced mandatory training in Alternative Dispute Resolution.
- Introduced a range of third-year Capstone Courses, which are designed to help students tie together the knowledge and skills they have gained over their time at law school, and make the transition from learning the law to practicing law.
- Provided our students with the option of taking Corporate Law in first year, an option that is unique among Canadian law schools.
- Organized pre-eminent speaker series courses in business law, private law, labour law, and mining finance, as well as the Coxford Lecture series on the rule of law. Our visiting speakers have included Supreme Court of Canada Justices, Nobel Prize winners, Ambassadors, and renowned scholars.
- Deepened our longstanding strength in business law with new faculty appointments and additional courses in insolvency and restructuring, international trade, mining finance and sustainability, corporate governance, and law and economics.
- Reviewed our curriculum to identify opportunities to embed Indigenous perspectives, laws, and histories within existing courses.
- Held Indigenous Law Camps at local First Nations communities, attended by both faculty and students.
- Introduced an annual Western Law Award for Teaching Excellence.
- Instituted a Teaching Seminar Series, where colleagues can share ideas and experiences.

Looking ahead, we will:

- Maintain a relatively small entering class size, so as to promote the challenging, engaging, and collegial learning that is a hallmark of Western Law.
- Ensure that compulsory courses are taught by full-time faculty as often as possible, and maximize the extent to which full-time faculty teach electives that complement their research expertise.
- Enhance and update our curriculum on an ongoing basis, particularly to ensure that our students have high-level skills in legal research, writing, and information literacy.
- Provide new opportunities for students to develop a depth of expertise in particular fields, so that they will excel in an increasingly sophisticated and specialized profession.
- Offer a diverse range of opportunities for students to apply their learning in clinics, internships, complex simulations, and advanced research projects.
- Expand the number and range of opportunities for our students to gain knowledge of Indigenous laws, perspectives, and experiences.

Priority 3: Producing outstanding scholarship that engages the academy, profession, policy-makers, and society

Since 2014, we have:

- Expanded our institutional research supports, including the appointment of a joint Research Officer, the establishment of an annual Dean's Research Fellowship, and an increase in the frequency of our faculty research workshops.
- Increased our success in obtaining external funding, with a greater number of different faculty members holding external or major internal grants.
- Fostered collaborative research, adding three new research groups in 2018: the Law and Feminism Research Group, the Legal History Research Initiative, and the Public and Private International Law Research Group. These complement our well-established Tort Law Research Group and Public Law Research Group.
- Appointed our first ever Canada Research Chair: Alan Miller, CRC in Law and Economics.
- Hosted national and international workshops in diverse areas, including private law, transitional justice, constitutional law, private theory, and labour law.

Looking ahead, we will:

- Provide consistent and constructive mentorship to untenured faculty.
- Offer financial support for student research assistants, research-related travel, and scholarly communications, with the aims of enhancing research productivity and impact, and increasing the number of projects that attract external funding.
- Promote collaboration in existing and emerging areas of strength, both within the Faculty of Law and in the broader university.
- Host national and international workshops and conferences.
- Continue to provide regular opportunities for faculty to share their work and receive meaningful feedback, and to more broadly enhance our research culture.
- Maintain a relatively small graduate program that is carefully tailored to each student's academic and career objectives.

Supporting Initiatives

In order to best achieve the above priorities, we need to build our supporting infrastructure in several key areas.

Space: The Josephine Spencer Niblett Building opened in 1961 – a time when our graduating class was just over 30 students and when law was taught almost entirely by conventional lectures. While it has grown incrementally over the years, our building has reached its capacity and is showing its age. We will develop plans to ensure that the Faculty has appropriate space to support the flexible and interactive learning, research collaboration, and student services that are required in a modern professional school.

Student Wellness and Resilience: There is an increasing awareness and openness about the mental health challenges faced by lawyers and law students, with a corresponding increase in demand for accommodations and wellness supports. In 2018, Western hired a full-time, embedded counsellor to provide individual counselling for students and design other programs to help students develop healthy ways to manage stress. We are committed to supporting students who are in acute or chronic need, and to enhancing all our students' resilience and ability to thrive in a challenging legal profession.

Alumni Engagement: Our alumni provide a vital connection to the changing legal profession, assist us as adjunct professors and through opportunities for practical skill development, and form a welcoming community for our graduating students. We will seek to meaningfully engage our alumni community through a more active Law Alumni Association and the creation of a formal Advisory Board.

Fundraising: In an era of fiscal restraint, it will be critical for Western Law to reduce its financial dependence on uncertain levels of government funding. We will ensure that our fundraising efforts are aligned with our strategic priorities, with particular focus on financial aid, endowed faculty positions, and improved learning space.



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