

# THE STUDY OF LAW “AT THE CENTER”

*Burnele V. Powell\**

THE act of writing this essay reminds me how difficult it is to capture the essence of a law school. Yet, that is what this essay is about. This is, in effect, a standing invitation for the unfamiliar to discover us, and for our friends to deepen their familiarity. Implicitly, it is our way of inviting you to consider whether you agree with the simple maxim that motivates us: *The study of law in the major city of one of the nation's metropolitan areas is, and manifestly ought to be, a different experience from the study of law in the hinterlands.*

Of course, like genetics, gravity, or the historic era in which one is born, we make no special claim of determinism or entitlement. To the contrary, we recognize that in many respects we are simply lucky. Still, we do not apologize for our good fortune; we merely pledge to make the most of it at every turn. We remember, you see, our parents' unstinting reminder that “to whom much is given, much is expected.”

When recently, then, *The American Lawyer Magazine* proclaimed that UMKC is the law school in the region to which the nation's one hundred largest law firms most often turn when hiring their associates, we were pleased to have that fact objectively noted but we were not surprised. Nor would it surprise us to have had it reported that our Bloch Law Library is the region's single most important law library—even before the substantial computerization we introduced in its *Virtual Classroom*.

Frankly, with more than 500 students (including J.D., LL.M. and “FLEX” students), 4000-plus alums throughout the Metroplex alone, and alums spread from D.C. to California and Alaska to Florida, there should be little wonder that we are widely disbursed, but even more widely connected.

In 1995, our centennial year, we described the UMKC School of Law succinctly in our motto: “At the center of the nation and in the forefront of legal education.” What we describe here, therefore, is continuing evidence that we remain committed to a description that is equally an aspiration. It pays homage to the Law School's great fortune of being located on a university campus near the world-famous Plaza and the Nelson-Atkins Art Museum, respectively, to our west and north. Then, too, *at the center* we stand in close proximity to the Kansas City Art Institute, the UMKC Conservatory of Music, the Bloch School of Business and Public Administration, the newly opened Kaufman Foundation headquarters building, the nearly completed Missouri/Powell Botanical Gardens, and the newly created walkway park along fabled Brush Creek.

Only fifteen short minutes by car from downtown Kansas City, and fewer still from the prosperous towers along College Boulevard in Kansas, we do not overstate our place when we describe ourselves as “at the center” of the region's action. Moreover, the just-completed north-south Bruce Watkins Freeway—barely half a mile from the campus—will dramatically link Eastern Jackson County, Missouri's fastest growing suburb, with Kansas City's soon-to-be revived downtown

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\* Dean and Professor of Law, University of Missouri–Kansas City School of Law.

entertainment and business area. We are moving, one might say, to the very rhythms of the region's educational, cultural, artistic, commercial, and philanthropic institutions.

Still, our strategic advantage does not obscure our traditional commitment to strength in the fundamental areas of legal education (*viz.*, torts, property, contracts, criminal law, civil procedure, and constitutional law). We point with pride, for example, to our increased offerings in the business and commercial sectors and our continuation of initiatives expanding offerings in advanced criminal law and trial techniques. Adding to these strengths, our faculty roster now includes curriculum expansions in both intellectual property and international business.

Two other major developments also require mention. Both emphasize our ability to combine the pursuit of academic excellence and public involvement. As a result of federal, state and local funding, the newly established Kansas City Tax Clinic was recently dedicated. The Tax Clinic provides students the opportunity to handle taxpayer assistance cases under the direction of volunteer lawyers and accountants. In addition, having now completed the second year of our summer school at Peking School of Law in Beijing, China, we now welcome a companion summer program in Ireland.

Back on the home front, I also wish to note that with the completion of the satellite libraries conversion in the Corporate Law/Tax Suite and the Forensics and Health Law Suite, we have begun to speed the pace of returning space to the law school's educational mission. Areas that until recently were abandoned to storage of excess library volumes, forgotten miscellany, and boxes of junk now provide needed small conference rooms. In place of the old satellite libraries, we have constructed the first of several work areas that we have designated "virtual offices." By removing walls and shelving, and adding lighting, electronic ports, computers, fax machines and other office technology, we have created two additional micro-classrooms—places where students and faculty can interact collaboratively in ways that only the invention of the microchip (and the assistance of the Lexis/Nexis Corp.) could have made possible.

Such imaginative uses of electronic technology also underscore our second promise: that we will operate *at the forefront of legal education*. As planning goes forward for other aspects of *Project Electrification*, the master plan to move the law school from a place of low (indeed, no) technology to a place of high technology in aid of our educational mission, the broad outlines are already becoming clear. The pace of the change is evidenced by the increasing availability on our website ([www.law.umkc.edu](http://www.law.umkc.edu)) of much of our general information, our catalog, course syllabuses, class discussion groups, class notes, and more.

Two recent expansions are particularly worth noting. The UMKC School of Law website links professors, students, the legal profession and the world to several important law school-based points of electronic education (POE). New among these links is the one to *Forensic Evidence.com*, an information center in forensic science, law and public policy for lawyers, forensic scientists, educators, and public officials. In addition, the Law School's home page continues to provide links to DIRT (the leading on-line real estate law discussion group), the *Famous Trials* home page (providing historical analyses of several former "trials of the century"), and LawProf (the largest on-line discussion group for law faculty).

You will also want to keep an eye on the *Urban Eye Initiative*, our web page devoted to urban-related legal issues. Under its "Urban Scene," we log inquiries from nonprofit and governmental organizations that might serve as topics for independent student research. In cooperation with The Urban Land-use Brief Bank, we have also joined with the ABA Section on State and Local Government to collect litigation briefs from leading cases dealing with land-use litigation, planning and public policy.

Even as we have moved to complete the renovation of our first two virtual offices, however, we have begun planning for the creation of two more, in the Jurisprudence and Constitutional Law Suite and the Advocacy Suite. When we talk about the forefront of legal education, therefore, our reference is our commitment to an educational program that is marked by imagination and innovation. We intend, for example, to connect all of the Law School's communication centers to the library's *Virtual Classroom*. Thus, in recent years, we have added additional computer workstations to the *Virtual Classroom*, stylishly updated its furniture, and expanded the workspace we devote there to multitask computers. Before year's-end, moreover, we hope to add a "computer cafeteria" to the Student Lounge to provide student access to the Web and e-mail.

Ultimately we know, however, that the computer alone cannot define us. Our distinction, instead, rests upon our commitment to the delivery of quality courses in an optimal educational environment. Although every school will eventually move to require increased use of computers by students, the approach that we have taken is to make communications and information technology pervasive. We, alone, among all of the schools with which we are familiar, have organized our facilities in suites where students have offices located adjacent to those of the faculty. We, alone, will electronically link our students' offices because we, alone, have committed to giving students the private physical space where the intellect, the imagination, and character can grow.

Let me put into perspective my suggestion that because much has been given to the UMKC School of Law, we are obligated to assume a greater leadership role in the twenty-first century than most others can (or would be willing to) bear.

We start with the fact that we are one of the few public law schools located in the hub-city of a metropolitan region where no other law schools exist. Because we are public, metropolitan-centered, and without a cross-town rival, we have, for more than a century, worked to live up to our special role and expectations in regard to the legal profession.

Thus, we accept that by tradition, preference, and design we owe a special responsibility to educate each generation of law students for the increasingly pivotal role that they will play in the life of this community and the legal profession. It is here, after all, that the people, their institutions, their dreams and livelihoods will continue to be found. Not surprisingly, it is from here—across this Metroplex—that our laws, commerce, finances, and social, political and civic transactions will increasingly affect the lives of people across throughout the Metroplex, the state, and the nation.

For us, then, it is natural to think of the law and this law school as intertwined with the lawyers and judges around us. Even if we wished otherwise, we could not escape it. Fortunately, however, we know and understand the life of this city. We

know and understand education that is the product of the interactions of professors, lawyers and judges is and, by necessity, must be, different from education on the periphery.

Accordingly, we accept the challenges that lie before us and invite all who, like us, are excited by such challenges to continue on and to look ahead to the twenty-first century.