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Dean's Desk: Staff Excellence is Institutional Excellence

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Bloomington

Parrish: Staff excellence is institutional excellence

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DEAN'S DESK
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Deans are commonly asked what makes for the very best law school. Great law schools provide not only an exceptional legal education, but they also advance the world's understanding of law and legal institutions while being major contributors to their states and local communities. Great law schools attract gifted students, recruit and retain the very best faculty of scholars and teachers, and inspire fiercely loyal alumni.

Of course, this is all true. But often the members of our community who make the biggest difference in our success are more hidden. Indeed, the work done far from the public eye usually distinguishes the great law schools from just the good ones. Students expect tailored placement and job support, strong financial aid counseling, first rate library services, leading facilities and the best technology and technology support. Law students often need individualized assistance and guidance on a range of topics from choosing classes to navigating personal challenges to thriving in student organizations. When it comes to the student experience, the people that our students interact with most frequently are our staff, and demands on staff have been particularly high as we've navigated the pandemic. In short, being one of the nation's top public law schools requires staff who work tirelessly behind the scenes, who care deeply about student success and who provide high-quality help. In Bloomington, we're fortunate that we have the best, with long-serving staff who are truly exceptional.

In this Dean's Desk, I thought I'd pause to recognize a few staff members at the law school and highlight why they are so critical to our success. Our senior leaders are exceptional — people like **Anne McFadden** (dean of students and assistant dean of student services), **Greg Canada** (assistant dean of admissions), **Mary Edwards** (assistant dean of finance and administration), **Lisa Hosey** (assistant dean of advancement), **Lesley Davis** (assistant dean of international programs) and **Susan DeMaine** (director of the Jerome Hall Law Library). In this column, however, I focus on a few examples of frontline staff whose daily acts of kindness and deep engagement with our students make a difference.

The best law schools have amazing libraries, and few can compare to the award-winning Jerome Hall Law Library. But great libraries aren't defined by the number of books; it's the people that matter. **Rebecca Bertoloni-Meli** is one of the reasons why our library is so special. Rebecca has worked as head of circulation and patron services for 25 years.



Rebecca Bertoloni-Meli

She's often the first person that faculty, students or library patrons see. She not only sets the tone with her warm and cheery welcome, but over the years she has helped train dozens of library staff to do the same. She's not a 9-5er who settles for just getting the job done; she has been creative and inspiring. One recent example is how she established an at-home delivery program for those whose health prevented them from visiting campus during the height of the pandemic. Another is how she scanned sections of in-demand textbooks for students when supply chain issues prevented students from timely obtaining their own copies. Yet her impact is not limited to the library. She can often be seen participating in school events and knows so many students on a first-name basis.



Marian Conaty

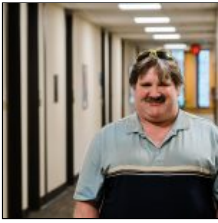
Another critical part of the law school is technology. As the computer network specialist and a member of the technology team, **Marian Conaty's** work takes place almost entirely in the digital world. For nearly 20 years she has tirelessly worked to update, test and troubleshoot the various networks and equipment that keep our school running. Problems in the classroom? Call Marian. Hosting a speaker over Zoom? Call Marian. Hiccups with your laptop? Call Marian. Your iPad just exploded? Call Marian. In the last two years, with the difficulties presented by the pandemic and the necessity of remote work, Marian became irreplaceable and her round-the-clock efforts kept the rest of the school running. But as with Rebecca, it's Marian's personal touch that makes the real difference. Marian's care for those around her, her delight in seeing others succeed and her willingness to always step in to provide one-on-one support even in the most inconvenient times sets her apart. (In fact, Marian is one of the rare two-time winners of the Maurer School of Law Staff Merit Award, underscoring how much her colleagues value her.) And while Marian is tremendous, her colleagues on the technology team — **Randy Sparks**, **Paul Styles** and **Garron Quimby** — are exceptional, too.

Of course, all the hard work would be for naught without our students. And that's where **Kimberly Hughes** from our admissions office comes in. Kim's colleagues describe her as "the embodiment of Hoosier hospitality," a trait that serves her and the school well in her role as the admissions office coordinator. Because her office fields so many inquiries from prospective applicants and from other curious callers and visitors looking for general school information, she is often the first point of contact. Some speculate her ability to make all feel welcome might stem from her 16 years of experience as a kindergarten teacher at Clear Creek Christian School in Bloomington (compared to 5-year-olds, I'm told law students are a walk in the park!). Kim's warmth and positivity are complemented by her consistent flexibility and proficiency in her work. The admissions office requires her to pivot from cyclical, long-term projects to new, quick-turnaround tasks, and Kim handles it all expertly.



Kim Hughes

While our graduates will never forget their first cold call and the faculty who taught them in their 1L year, sometimes it's the physical space that makes a critical difference to learning and student success. **Phil Poff** is the facilities services coordinator at IU Maurer, whose duties range from moving furniture — turning our offices and public areas into both



Phil Poff

functional and welcoming spaces for those who use them daily or visit them only occasionally — to responding to student locker issues to the task of salting our icy front steps and sidewalks every winter. In all his work, Phil's positivity sets him apart as a reliable source of both practical support and day-brightening cheer. His giving nature has even spilled over into after-work hours; he once volunteered to build a new fence for a staff member experiencing a serious illness. Phil's hard work is central to so many of IU Maurer's major events and daily operations. His work — along with the meticulous work of longtime staff member and facilities director **Steve Withem** and the work of other facilities staff such as **Tim Fleener** — ensures that our building operations are smooth.

Since coming to the law school in 2005, **Sarah Snyder** has become an essential member of the Business Office team, where she handles all the law school's HR issues. As our HR representative, Sarah is among the first to welcome new staff to the school and plays an essential part in the process of integrating new faculty, visiting lecturers and even student workers. Sarah takes seriously her responsibility to provide an understanding ear when faculty and staff encounter problems, and her balanced responses to even the most sensitive situations have earned her a reputation as a reliable confidant. During her time at the law school, she has also applied this dedication to her own personal growth, earning a bachelor's degree at IU in 2018 and achieving her lifelong dream of owning a horse. Her ability to balance the demands of her work while fulfilling her personal goals and family responsibilities is clear proof of Sarah's excellence.



Sarah Snyder

I could go on about the members of staff whose daily contributions to our culture make a difference in how we work, teach and advance as a school. These few examples barely scratch the surface. This last year, in a national survey of satisfaction with financial aid support and counseling by **Paul Leopold**, our director of financial aid, the law school ranked in the very top one to two law schools in the nation. The same was true for the support provided to students in their job searches by our Career Services Office, with students reporting support far exceeding the support provided by other law school peers. Our coordinators for our research centers make our leading faculty research possible. And our faculty's work would grind to a halt without the support that **Rita Eads** and her team of faculty assistants provide.

Among all these individuals and their colleagues, you'll find a giving spirit that sets an example to the rest of the members of the law school community, one that extends even beyond the walls of the school. While our students pour their hearts and energies into public interest work through our clinics, practica and pro bono projects, our staff match this desire to give back in their spirit of volunteerism. The law school does much to support the state and the local community, and staff play a key role in fulfilling that mission, too.

The school's annual food drive for Hoosier Hills Food Bank is not only staff-run but sees staff contributions that rival those of the students and faculty year after year. Staff are often the catalysts behind opportunities for student engagement in our community as well,

organizing initiatives like a Habitat for Humanity build and volunteer hours at Bloomington's Community Kitchen. One of our former faculty assistants even spearheaded a highway cleanup crew through the Adopt-A-Road project for years, recruiting fellow members of staff and faculty to join her efforts even into her retirement. And this is besides all the programmatic support our staff provides, including our live-client clinics, our Rural Justice Initiative, our public service programs and more.

All these contributions — from the mundane task of moving furniture to the daylong investment of time in a community beautifying project — exemplify the attitude of excellence and service we expect from our students and faculty. Yet the most impressive examples are found sometimes in the offices and people that those outside the school see the least. It is in these staff efforts that we can find the spirit of excellence at any law school. Great law schools depend on having highly skilled, motivated and dedicated staff who care deeply for our students and who understand our mission to train the next generation of leaders in the legal profession. I'm grateful that the law school is home to such a group of talented and caring professionals. •

Austen Parrish is the dean and James H. Rudy professor at Indiana University Maurer School of Law. Opinions expressed are those of the author.