

Preparing Lawyers

An Interview with
Matthew Diller, Law Dean, Fordham University

EDITORS' NOTE *Matthew Diller assumed his current post in 2015 after having served as Dean at Cardozo Law. He was previously a member of the Fordham Law faculty for 16 years and served as the school's associate dean for academic affairs. Diller received his bachelor's degree, magna cum laude, in European History from Harvard College and his J.D., also magna cum laude, from Harvard Law, where he was an editor at the Harvard Law Review. He clerked for the late Honorable Walter R. Mansfield on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. Before coming to the Fordham Law faculty, Diller was a staff attorney for the Legal Aid Society's Civil Appeals and Law Reform Unit in New York City.*



Matthew Diller

INSTITUTION BRIEF *Fordham Law School (fordham.edu) has provided a complete education in the law for more than a century. While the legal profession has changed during that time, the core mission of a Fordham Law education has not. The law school values academic excellence, the pursuit of justice, and the ethical practice of the lawyer's craft. Fordham lawyers are dedicated to the highest standards of the legal profession and using the law in the service of others.*

How do you define the strength of Fordham Law School and what have been the keys to its success?

Our strengths have built over time. What stands out about our law school is that our lawyers are people who are serious about the practice of law and who are client-focused. They understand the profession is about serving clients and meeting their needs. Fordham lawyers are smart and intellectually capable. It's those traits in combination with being trustworthy, service-oriented, and working well with others that make our lawyers special.

It's not sufficient just to know the law. Lawyers also must be able to deploy the law to solve client problems. That's where Fordham lawyers excel.

How important is it to teach the relationship aspect of being a lawyer?

We have a class called Fundamental Lawyering Skills that the vast majority of our students take, which focuses on client counseling as well as the skill of negotiation. We also have a very strong clinical program where our students represent real

clients under close supervision of faculty. This gives students direct, hands-on experience in client representation.

Additionally, we have superb, nationally known simulation programs in trial advocacy and moot court.

Extending even beyond that, though, is the culture of the school. It's an ethos of care, part of which stems from our Jesuit tradition. It has been handed down and developed over the generations and permeates the entire school.

How critical has it been to build a diverse student base and to attract international students?

The diversity of the environment is really important to what we do because being an effective lawyer is all about dealing with people with different perspectives.

We can't teach people to do that and model it unless the environment is diverse. This requires that we have a diverse student body, faculty, and staff and that we bring people together.

We have seen an increase in the globalization of our student body. People come from around the world for our doctoral program, as well as for the two one-year master's in law for nonlawyers that we recently launched.

How does the law school interact with the other schools at Fordham?

We have a great deal of interchange with the other professional schools at Fordham. We're all part of the same campus, and we commonly have students doing joint-degree programs, most often in social service or business. We have students who cross-register for courses in other schools as well.

How have you continued to innovate within the curriculum?

When I look at how the profession has changed, it brings me back to the core proposition I started out with, which is the critical importance of preparing students to be professionals and to understand professional values and to be able to advise clients effectively.

It used to be that lawyers would graduate from the law school and they would know little else other than the law. The legal employers would train new lawyers and invest in them for the long haul. There was a tremendous emphasis on mentorship and learning the craft in practice.

Law firms still provide mentorship, but the basic model in the industry has changed in that most lawyers who come out of law school and

go to large law firms are gone from there within three to five years. That means that legal employers want new lawyers who can add value more quickly. Focusing on those needs has helped us in this market.

We are constantly innovating and, in fact, we are in the process of rolling out a new strategic plan that carries the values and strengths of a Fordham Law education into the future and ensures our graduates will be more effective than ever. We focus on emerging fields of law and have also expanded courses on the business side. We are launching a program on law and entrepreneurship. We have added a quantitative methods unit to orientation to emphasize a number of key concepts about the basic economics of finance. We have created five subject matter concentrations so students can focus their studies in their upper level years on particular fields of practice.

Will you discuss the value a law degree provides, even for one who is not planning to actually practice?

What people value in those who have law degrees is a way of looking at problems and issues and breaking them down into subsidiary elements so they can examine each piece and ask a series of questions. That analytical approach carries through in many different fields in business and government.

How do you envision Fordham's role as a part of the community?

Public service is part of our ethos, so supporting the community is very important to us. It's also a vital part of training lawyers because those who are committed to the community will be better lawyers.

Our clinical program provides opportunities for students to engage in direct service. We also have student volunteer organizations where students work with clients and community groups around the city on particular issues. Finally, we have major academic centers on human rights, social justice, national security, urban governance, legal ethics, and other fields that have direct impact on individuals, communities, and on policy formation.

Did you ever think you would come back to Fordham after you left earlier in your career?

Fordham made a tremendous impact on me through the commitment of the school to build community and to service. I saw how important that was to preparing lawyers to go out and serve, and I was happy to return. ●