Carter preparing tomorrow’s litigators

Personalities of Pittsburgh

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Patty Tascarella
Senior Reporter-  Pittsburgh Business Times

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William Carter Jr. grew up in Cleveland and started his career at large law firms in Washington, D.C., but soon decided his future was in academia. A year after taking the helm of the University of Pittsburgh's School of Law in 2012, he made the gutsy decision to cut first-year enrollment by 17 percent from 211 to 175. Carter talked about steering the school as the legal environment evolves, what’s shaped his own career and why litigation is fascinating.

What appealed to you about the law?

Growing up in working-class, blue-collar environments, I did not know any lawyers, and I am the first and still only lawyer in my family and one of only a few in my family to complete college. It was not until my senior year of college that I considered becoming a lawyer. I had always been interested in issues of equality and social justice and took a course in college dealing with those issues that opened my eyes as to how the law and lawyers can advance or impede social justice. In a twist of fate, the class included readings from the work of Professor Derrick Bell, Pitt Law ’57.

What was your takeaway from working at firms?

I had done an internship in D.C., and wanted to go back there to practice. I had a great time when I was in private practice at Squire, Sanders & Dempsey and at Ropes & Gray and had the opportunity to work on a variety of interesting cases. I worked in the litigation department. They’re both big, multinational firms, but at the time, their D.C. offices were small, about 30 at Squire, Sanders, maybe 40 at Ropes & Gray, so you had all the resources of a big firm but got hands-on experience more quickly.

Why litigation?

If you don't have lawyers in your family or network, what you know comes through popular culture, and most of what you see is litigation. It's where the theatrics are. It's easier to portray. It just looked interesting. I've passed that stage of my life and still find litigation to be a very interesting process, and I still teach litigation-related courses. It's almost like a puzzle or chess match.

What do you like least about your job?

The annual frenzy accompanying each year's U.S. News (& World Report) rankings.

What are you teaching this term?

Civil procedure. It's a mandatory first-year course essentially about the system of civil litigation — the rules that govern, the filing of complaints, motions to dismiss. This is my 14th time in a row teaching it. It's good to be back in the classroom. As dean, I don't teach a full class load or have as much interaction as I did before. So I get back to doing the thing that got me interested in the law in the first place.

In fall 2013, you reduced first-year admissions. What went into making that decision?

It was something that I had my eye on even before I became dean. A couple of things were happening simultaneously. Although the market continues to slowly recover from the recession, it's a slow recovery, right? The trend line is pointing upward, but no one I know thinks it will turn out to be the huge boom before the recession. You can't, as a law school, exercise much control over the demand. Legal employers will hire how many they need, not how many we tell them to hire. What you can control is the supply size. If you continue to bring in classes the same size as during the boom, you have to ask yourself, do you think you can continue to place that number of graduates in a less frothy environment? To my mind, that was no. You're doing the students a disservice. They're competing with each other over a slice of the same pie. Applications continue to be down nationally, that's common for every school, so if you want to maintain a similar quality and diversity with a smaller pool of people, you either shrink the size of the class or compromise the quality.

How is Pitt preparing students for growth areas?

We at Pitt Law have been investing heavily in faculty and new courses in fields that show regional and national growth. Energy law is one. I expect this year to announce the formation of a formal energy initiative at the university. Cybersecurity and information security are huge areas of concern to employers. We had a strong footprint in areas that continue to grow like health law and intellectual property. One thing you can look at is to match what's happening, but another layer of this equation gets overlooked. A lot of folks say we have too many lawyers. I don't believe that's true, at least for a certain sector, lower-income. There's an undersupply of lawyers to serve people who are either truly poor or, like my family, working-class. Affordability and access of legal services remains an issue.

What do you do to unwind?
Between the job and my family — my wife and I have two little girls — there is very little time for anything else. I do a little photography, and I have a modest collection of jazz records — actual records and a record player.

Patty Tascarella covers accounting, banking, finance, legal, marketing and advertising and foundations. Contact her at ptascarella@bizjournals.com or 412-208-3832.