HIStory of Stanford Law School

Stanford Law School first welcomed students in 1893, two years after Stanford University opened its doors. The Law Department, as it was initially called, accepted freshmen in a program leading to a bachelor's degree in law. The first professor to be engaged was Benjamin Harrison, former President of the United States, who delivered a landmark series of lectures on the Constitution. The second was Nathan Abbott, a scholar who was to head the nascent law program. Abbott assembled around him a small faculty to which he imparted a standard of rigor and excellence that endures to this day.

In 1900, under Abbott's leadership, the Law Department became truly professional. Five faculty members were employed, and a course sequence was developed that—except for a course in Elementary Law—was restricted to upperclassmen and extended for an additional two years after the bachelor's degree. The course of study was open to all undergraduates, female as well as male.

Landmark events in those early days included Stanford's participation, in 1900, as one of 27 founding members of the American Association of Law Schools. And in 1901 the Department conferred its first LLB degree.

The great earthquake of April 1906 did little damage to the Department's quarters on the Inner Quad. But destruction elsewhere on campus led to the cancellation of the last three weeks of classes and a general belt-tightening when classes resumed in the fall.

The evolution of Stanford's law program from a department to a professional school occurred in two steps. The first change, in 1908, was in title only; the School continued to be administered as a department, although it did begin charging tuition. Not until 1916 was the second step taken, when the Board of Trustees approved the designation of the School's chief executive officer as Dean.

In 1912 a chapter of the Order of the Coif was established, with four students of the graduating class elected as its initial members.

World War I seriously disrupted the work of the Law School. Two of the six members of the faculty—Dean Charles Andrews Huston and Professor Joseph Walter Bingham—were granted leaves to serve in Washington. Enrollment also fell, while Military Law was added to the curriculum.

Professor Marion Rice Kirkwood's long and fruitful period of leadership began in 1922, when he was named Acting Dean. The next year he became Dean of the School—a post he held for 22 years, until retiring in 1945. The 1927–28 school year saw the successful introduction of a new moot court program. The Stanford Law Association—forerunner of today's alumni law societies—was also put on firm footing during the early years of the Kirkwood deanship, and the first directory of Stanford Law alumni was published in 1934.

The great economic depression beginning in 1929 was keenly felt at the School. Enrollment, already down because of more stringent entrance requirements, fell further. And the faculty accepted a 10 percent cut in salary.

The School's academic content grew to reflect developments on the national scene. By 1940, Dean Kirkwood later recalled, "It seemed clear that government would play
a far greater role in the regulation of private affairs than in the past.” Thus Administrative Law, Taxation, Trade Regulation, Labor Law, and related subjects became part of the curriculum.

The University celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1941, on the eve of America’s entrance into World War II. Two members of the Law faculty—Professor James Emmet Brenner and Associate Professor John Bingham Hurlbut (who had just been named Assistant Dean)—were called to military service, and others soon followed. Enrollment dropped sharply, until, at the end of 1943, only 30 students were in attendance.

Professor Lowell Turrentine took the helm as Acting Dean in 1945-46, a year in which the School stretched to meet the needs of returning veterans. A special first-year class of 133 was admitted in December for an intense three-term program, which would enable the new students to take up second-year work the following fall. The faculty then consisted of nine regular full-time professors, one visiting professor, two associate professors, and seven lecturers.

A highlight of that year was a dinner at the Fairmont Hotel, attended by some 400 students and alumni, honoring Judge George E. Crothers, whose generosity made possible the construction of Crothers Hall, the dormitory that has since housed so many generations of Stanford Law students.

At the same time, plans were laid to remodel and convert the University’s administration building, at the front of the Quad, for the burgeoning Law School. A successful fund-raising drive was launched, culminating in the dedication, in July 1950, of new quarters for the School.

The coming in 1946 of Carl Bernhardt Spaeth as Dean “marked the beginning of a new era,” as former dean Kirkwood later observed. During Dean Spaeth’s tenure, which lasted until 1962, the School’s first four professorships were established, as was the Stanford Law Review under the leadership of its first president, Warren Christopher ’49. Dean Spaeth recruited faculty from the best law schools in the country, including four professors from Columbia University School of Law, a hiring move remembered at Stanford as “the great raid on Columbia.”
Bayless Manning was then brought from Yale, and under his decanal guidance Stanford expanded its role of national leadership in legal education.

Further advances were made during the deanship of Thomas Ehrlich (1971–76), who led the successful effort to fund and build Crown Quadrangle, the School’s present home. Designed specifically for legal education, Crown Quad is a complex of four linked buildings: the open-stack Robert Crown Library and faculty office building, the 600-seat Kresge Auditorium, the FIR classroom building, and the James Irvine Gallery of meeting rooms and faculty and student lounges. Also in the 1970s, women and ethnic minorities began to have a substantial presence at the School—a trend that has continued in subsequent years.

The School consolidated its position as one of the nation’s top law schools under Charles J. Meyers (1976–81). His deanship is noted for, among other things, great strides in the areas of business law, law and economics, and clinical teaching.

The tenure of John Hart Ely (1982–87) saw continued innovation, with grant and loan-forgiveness programs for students choosing public interest employment, the construction of a law student center, and the development (together with students and community leaders) of a nearby community legal services center.

Under the direction of Paul Brest (1987–99), the School developed innovative concentrations in business and public interest law, strengthened its curriculum in environmental and international law, and took the lead in establishing Stanford University’s multidisciplinary Center on Conflict and Negotiation. In 1994, Dean Brest initiated a fundraising campaign focused on increasing faculty support and scholarships for students, and raising the level of annual alumni giving. The effort ultimately raised more than $115 million for the School.

The present Dean, Kathleen M. Sullivan, took office in 1999. Dean Sullivan’s vision for the School includes providing students with a rigorous, traditional legal education, while taking advantage of the School’s location on the Pacific Rim and in Silicon Valley to prepare students for careers in an increasingly global and high-technology community. During her first year, she reconfigured the administrative structure of the School, appointing its first
Vice Dean, and instituted a strategic planning process. By the close of her second year, she had spearheaded the thorough modernization of the School’s FIR Hall, introducing state-of-the-art instructional technology equipment into each of its 16 classrooms. In her third and fourth years, she significantly enhanced the School’s clinical program by introducing clinics in the areas of education advocacy and civil rights advocacy, and launching a new community clinic. These programs supplement existing clinical offerings in the areas of environmental law, criminal procedure, and cyberlaw.

There are now more than 7,800 living alumni of Stanford Law School. They are found on benches ranging from that of the United States Supreme Court to state trial courts; in every recent presidential administration; in the Senate, House of Representatives, and many state legislatures; on university faculties; in large and small law firms, corporations, and other business enterprises here and abroad; in district attorneys’ and public defenders’ offices, public interest law firms, and legal services offices; and in various other areas of endeavor.

Many things have changed at the School since its founding in 1893. In the early days, Stanford law students were drawn mainly from California; today’s students come from every part of the United States and several foreign countries. Admission to the School in 1893 was not competitive; in 2003, more than 5,200 students applied for the 170 to 180 places in the entering class. In 1893, the tuition was zero; in 2002–03 it is $30,880—an amount that still covers only a fraction of the real costs of operating the School.

However, Stanford Law School’s basic mission has not changed since Abbott’s day: dedication to the highest standards of excellence in legal scholarship and to the training of lawyers equipped diligently, imaginatively, and honorably to serve their clients, their profession, and the public interest.
L to R: Dean Thomas Ehrlich, Dean Bayless A. Manning, Dean Kathleen M. Sullivan, Sheila Spaeth (widow of Dean Carl B. Spaeth), and Dean Paul Brest.

STANFORD LAW SCHOOL DEANS

Nathan Abbott* 1893–1907
Frederic Campbell Woodward* 1908–1916
Charles Andrews Huston* 1916–1922
Marion Rice Kirkwood* 1922–1945
Carl Bernhardt Spaeth* 1946–1962
Bayless Andrew Manning 1964–1971
Thomas Ehrlich 1971–1976
Paul Brest 1987–1999
Kathleen M. Sullivan 1999–2004

*Deceased