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Architect of the Modern King Hall

Madhavi Sunder

Rex Perschbacher was a champion of public legal education and the architect of the modern King Hall with its exalted ideals of diversity, access, and social justice.

I am proud to have been one of the first two faculty members hired during Rex's first year as dean in 1999. A leader with the vision and courage to take the school into the twenty-first century, Rex led the faculty to hire two junior women that year — me and Lisa Pruitt. A decade later, at the celebration of his retirement as dean, I noted that Rex had hired some twenty-five of the thirty plus members of the faculty at the time, and that nearly half of those hires were women and/or minorities. Rex's commitment to diversity among the faculty and student body laid the critical foundation for King Hall to become "50 at 50." By its fiftieth anniversary in 2015, King Hall's faculty was fifty percent women and more than fifty percent faculty of color. This is an astounding feat for a top research university law school. Rex's leadership was critical to this achievement. Rex long ago recognized that excellence and diversity go hand in hand, and that it was important for a public law school to reflect the diversity of California, and our nation. Rex was also a champion of diversity of perspective and methodology. Under his leadership, the school hired more scholars with PhDs in a variety of disciplines, from economics to history to psychology. King Hall hired scholars doing both quantitative and qualitative research. Rex championed interdisciplinary scholarship on race, culture, law and society. In short, Rex ushered King Hall's scholarship into the modern era.

Today, the faculty is consistently ranked in the top twenty-five for scholarly impact.

Rex was a champion of access to a great public legal education. He was the lone University of California (“UC”) law dean to issue a clarion call against rising tuitions and the privatization of the public university. Though King Hall was not able to fully resist these changes, the school has remained committed to access, offering generous financial aid and admitting the most diverse classes in the school’s history in the past few years.

Perhaps his greatest legacy is solidifying the school’s commitment to social justice, and to the ideals of the building’s namesake, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Rex made the brilliant choice to lead with Kevin Johnson by his side as his associate dean, and mentored Kevin to become the next great dean of King Hall. The school prioritized clinical legal education long before the rest of the academy did; Rex was himself director of clinical legal education when he first started at King Hall. A scholar of professional responsibility and legal ethics, Rex strove to teach the next generation of lawyers that fairness, equality and justice lay at the very heart of the profession.

Rex was a quiet and humble leader, but he had great ambition for King Hall. He believed that the great work of the clinics, centers, scholars, and students of King Hall should be supported and inspired by a twenty-first century physical plant worthy of the school’s ennobled endeavors. Today, King Hall students learn in a beautiful and modern law school building that is almost exclusively the legacy of Rex’s commitment and determination.

Above all, I learned from Rex what makes a law school great, and the secret ingredients that too many other schools ignore: community and decency. He was always warm, kind, and generous— he always made me feel like a star! Rex truly loved King Hall. He played in the annual Boutin Golf Tournament to raise money for public interest scholarships in October 2017, despite deteriorating health. I was humbled to follow Rex as the second holder of the Daniel J. Dykstra Chair, named after the legendary founding faculty member Dan Dykstra, who mentored Rex. Dan Dykstra’s commitment to King Hall as a true community continues to thrive today because leaders like Rex believed this to be the defining spirit of King Hall.

It is cruel that his illness took Rex so suddenly after his retirement. He was blessed to have Debbie Bassett, a graduate and former faculty member of King Hall, as his partner. She took great care of him always, and especially in his final, most difficult year. We are all grieving the loss of a great human being and Dean.