



Artist's rendering of the front of King Hall's expansion

UC DAVIS DEAN SEES UPWARD TRAJECTORY

At first blush, it seems like a terrible time to be dean of UC Davis's King Hall or, indeed, of any University of California law school.

California's budget crisis pummeled the University of California system, resulting in across the board cuts in 2009, soaring student fees, and a temporary stop this April to a huge construction project designed to rejuvenate the forty-year-old King Hall. Add to that a dismal job market for graduating law students and an increasingly challenging climate for fundraising—the lifeblood of a school more and more dependent on private funding.

Still, Kevin R. Johnson is more than sanguine about the present and the future of his law school and his job as dean at King Hall.



Dean Kevin R. Johnson

Erik Cummins

“This is a good time,” says Johnson. “The trajectory is upward.”

While acknowledging the fiscal constraints facing his school, Johnson points to several factors that make this a terrific time to be at Davis.

This year, the school moved up to thirty-fifth from forty-fourth in the ever-important *U.S. News & World Report* law school rankings. Construction has resumed on the \$22 million capital improvement project that will more than double the size of King Hall and bring it into the digital age. The campus will also soon be the home of the school's new International Law Center and the California Legislature's Law Revision Commission, as well as an expanded law library and a large, new courtroom that will occasionally host the Ninth Circuit



Mabie Law Library, UC Davis

Photo by Robert Durell

Court of Appeals and the California Supreme Court, as well as the school's moot court program.

Then there's this feather in the school's cap: Davis hired the UC system's first Hispanic law school dean when it appointed Johnson to the post last year.

Since then, Davis has been getting the national attention it has long sought. Early in his tenure, Johnson ordered a relaunch of the school's Web site, and he hired Pamela Wu, a former television anchor with KCRA in Sacramento, to help raise the school's profile. With her assistance and Johnson's prodding, the school's professors were quoted more than any other law school's faculty during the Sonia Sotomayor confirmation hearings. And Johnson himself was a big part of that: he blogged throughout the hearings for *La Opinion*, the largest Spanish-language newspaper in the United States.

"We want to avoid being the best kept secret of legal academia," Johnson says. "We have to be a little less modest. We are somewhat Midwestern in our approach, so we need to do a better job representing what we have here."

Like Sotomayor, Johnson came from modest means. He grew up on welfare in Southern California's San Gabriel

Valley and attended the region's public schools.

"I attended a public university, so it's very important to me to stay as successful as we can," says Johnson, a product of UC Berkeley and Harvard Law School. "We have an obligation—a moral duty—to make sure this place is open and accessible."

Johnson, a prolific scholar and twenty-year veteran of UC Davis School of Law, adds, "I try really hard to make sure people from moderate and disadvantaged backgrounds can fulfill the dream of going to law school."

Davis, which is located in a quiet farming community just west of Sacramento, used to draw students primarily from California. Now, the school is attracting a far larger share of students from across the United States.

That's among several reasons the school has seen its national rankings improve. The quality of the school's students is up overall, the school's bar pass rate continues to climb, and private fundraising and faculty scholarship continue to grow.

"We had our first graduating class in 1969, so we've moved up very quickly," Johnson says. "We were kind of a start-up law school for a long time. But now peo-

ple value it, enjoy it, and promote it. And that builds on itself.”

Scholarship has been a major focus for Johnson, as it was for his predecessor, Rex Perschbacher. Vikram Amar, a professor and the school’s dean for academic affairs, says Johnson practices what he preaches.

“Kevin demonstrates that diversity and academic excellence are mutually reinforcing,” Amar says. “He’s one of the most accomplished immigration scholars of his generation. He is in the top two or three percent of all law professors being cited today.”

That level of scholarship and hard work, Amar says, helps Johnson bring his message to the school’s thirty-five member faculty.

“He demands a lot from all of us,” Amar says. “But it’s easy to go to the faculty and ask for things when you are doing so much yourself.”

Davis has other less tangible factors in its favor as well. With class sizes of fewer than two hundred students, it’s much more intimate than larger law schools. The school is also housed in a single building—King Hall—and will remain so when the expansion is complete in 2010. And in a place where it seems everyone bikes, it’s clear that the community itself is very tight-knit, down-to-earth, and cooperative.

“The people you are going to deal with here, you are going to deal with again and again,” Johnson says. “With the experience here at UC Davis, you are part of a community for life.”

Still, Johnson isn’t satisfied. While being careful not to peg growth to a particular number or ranking,

he would like to see the school become ranked among the top twenty nationwide.

“To do that, we need to do a full-court press in marketing, scholarship, hiring, and development,” he says.

A soft-spoken and contemplative father of three teenagers, Johnson is a huge sports fan and often uses sports analogies when describing his job at Davis. Sometimes, he says, he feels like a college football recruiter.

During the law school recruiting season, Johnson calls each and every minority and disadvantaged law school candidate by phone. Recently, he called a young woman candidate but reached her mother instead and had a long conversation with her. When the woman’s daughter ultimately arrived at Davis, Johnson asked her what her mother had told her about their conversation. “Mija, if dean wants you to go there, you should,” her mother said. “You have a friend there.”

Second-year student Edward “E. J.” Brown first met Johnson three years ago while attending the school’s four-week, on-campus outreach program for prospective students. They bonded while on a rafting trip on the Sacramento River.

“He’s always checking in to see how I’m doing,” says Brown, who played for the UC Davis football team as an undergraduate. “He asks me how the Davis football team is doing, and I tease him about Cal. Then he asks, ‘How’s school?’ and ‘How’s life after football?’”

Johnson attends most meetings of the school’s La Raza law students’ group, of which second-year student Emilio Camacho is a member. But Johnson first reached out to Camacho when he was an undergraduate at Davis.

“Dean Johnson is the reason I stayed here,” says Camacho, who was accepted by nineteen law schools.

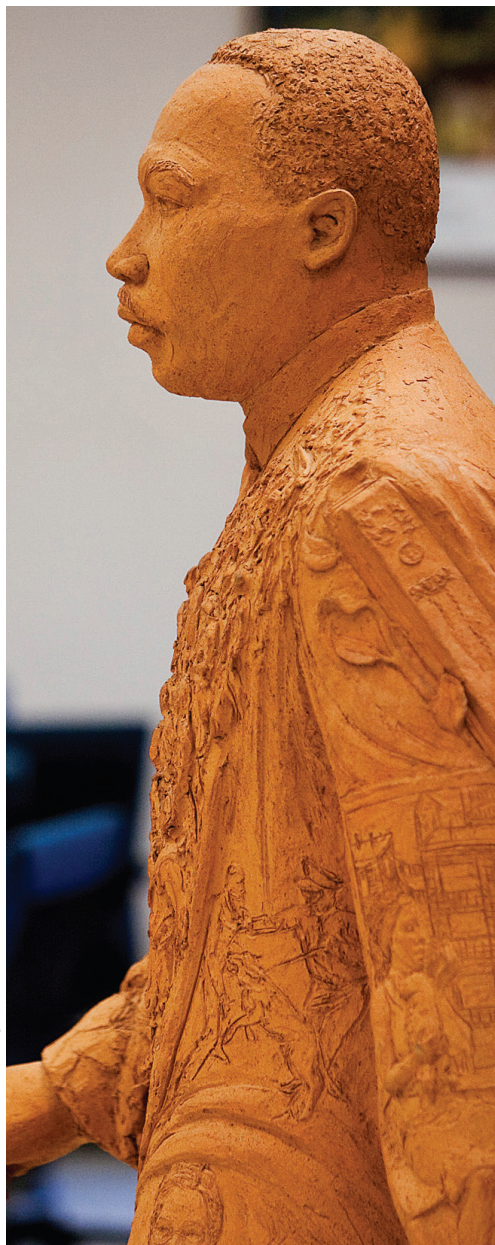


Photo by Robert Durrell

Statue of Dr. Martin Luther King, King Hall

Recently, Johnson took time to grill carne asada for one of the group's fundraisers. "Nowhere else in America will you see a dean doing that," Camacho says. "He makes an effort to be seen and support everybody, so everybody feels included and feels welcome."

Second-year student John Puccinelli bonded with Johnson over their mutual affection for the Los Angeles Dodgers. "I run into him in the halls and we talk for two or three minutes," Puccinelli says. "That's sort of surprising. I'm not used to having that kind of conversational relationship with a professor or a dean."

The same goes for Johnson's interactions with the school's faculty.

"He walks the halls every day," says Lisa Ikemoto, a professor and King Hall alumnus. "He's genuinely engaged in the faculty and the law school. He has not displayed any eagerness to become a dictator dean."

Ikemoto describes Johnson as low-key. "On the other hand, I don't know if he sleeps," she says. "I get emails from him time-stamped at 4:30 a.m."

Johnson has undertaken a road show to the school's diaspora of alums.

Keith Allen-Niesen, an attorney at Manatt, Phelps & Phillips in Los Angeles, graduated from King Hall in 1989. He met Johnson during one of the dean's outreach visits. "It was almost like he did a listening tour," says Allen-Niesen. "He's tapping into alumni he doesn't know, and alumni throughout the UC system are historically an untapped resource."

Johnson took his first job with Heller, Ehrman, White & McAuliffe—one of San Francisco's oldest and best-known law firms, and left just months before he was slated to become partner.

"I worked for a great firm on some great cases," Johnson says. "I thought the world of the people at Heller Ehrman. But I wanted to try something new. And I was committed to working somewhere that had a faculty known for both its teaching and its scholarship."

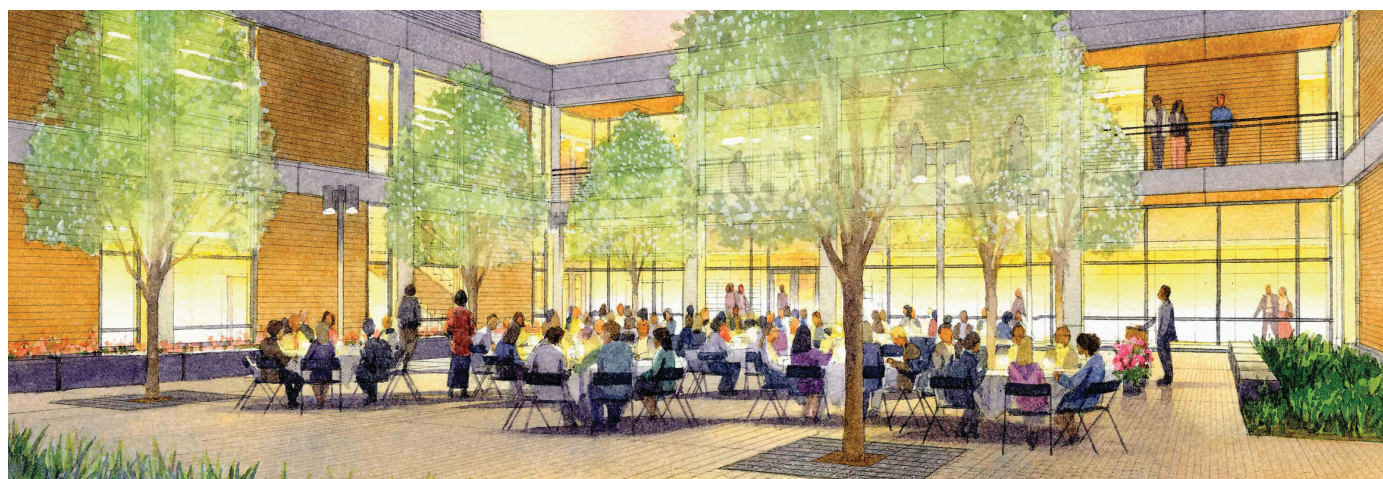
Heller's demise last year was "quite a wake-up call," Johnson says. Half-jokingly, he says he can no longer return to Heller if things don't work out at Davis.

Rankings are important at King Hall. But Johnson also points to the school's legal clinics, which are designed to help local clients. One is based in nearby Woodland and works with battered women, 75 percent of whom are Hispanic. Another works with immigrants facing expulsion, while a third focuses on the civil rights of prisoners.

"These clinics provide an excellent education and real life experiences," Johnson says. "I tell students, 'You changed a whole family's life. You stopped a woman from being beaten.' That's a powerful experience."

And that, he says, is key to the experience at King Hall.

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Artist's rendering of the back of King Hall's expansion