Syverud will begin his position as the 28th dean of Washington University School of Law and the Ethan A.H. Shepley University Professor in January 2006.

He succeeds Joel Seligman, who became president of the University of Rochester on July 1, 2005. Prior to Syverud’s arrival, Daniel L. Keating, associate dean for academic affairs and the Tyrrell Williams Professor of Law, is serving as dean.

Syverud’s résumé spans a wealth of legal experience in the courts, professional practice, research, education, and administration—firmly placing him among the ranks of the nation’s top legal educators. A quick scan of his credentials reveals, in part, what made him such a widely sought-after dean: Magna cum laude graduate of Georgetown University’s Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and the University of Michigan Law School. Law clerk for a justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. Trial lawyer in insurance and product-liability cases.

Although it’s too early to delineate firm goals, he has some tentative ones in mind—“working hard on career placement for students, on strengthening and expanding faculty, and on strengthening ties to alumni and their connection to the School.”

Syverud’s style of attaining face-to-face, one-on-one input, wedded to his own vision, will help him guide the law school to greater prominence over the coming years. As he says, “We can achieve ambitious goals.”

Syverud’s vision as to what constitutes a good law school can be measured on an individual scale: “There are two common views of law school. One, the Olympian view, is that it exists to rank students and give awards. The other, which I prefer, is that its purpose is to train every student to have a successful and ethical professional career. It’s a school, not an Olympics.”

One could argue that, at Vanderbilt, Syverud himself performed Olympian feats. During his eight-year tenure, he spearheaded a $40-million capital campaign. He also oversaw the recruitment of 30 new faculty members with some prominent lateral hires from other top schools (including Washington University); the complete design, construction, and fundraising for all new law school facilities; and the institution of new programs, including a law and business program, an LLM program for foreign lawyers, the Vanderbilt Directors College for directors of publicly traded companies.
companies, and clinical programs on domestic violence and community economic development.

He achieved all this while continuing to teach almost a full load and to publish scholarly articles.

“Kent Syverud is an extraordinary dean and an extraordinary individual,” says Thomas G. Burish, now president of Washington and Lee University and who, as Vanderbilt’s provost, hired Syverud in 1997. “His contributions to Vanderbilt University Law School were enormous, but so too were his contributions to the university as a whole.”

Burish suggests that Syverud’s accomplishments came not single-handedly, but by enlisting and motivating those around him. “Kent is consultative in style, but not afraid to stand up for what he believes,” he continues. “He quickly earns the trust and admiration of those with whom he works and can be disarmingly engaging, even with those who initially may have disagreed with him. He sets high standards for himself and others, and then devotes all his considerable talent to achieving them—and expects, and enables, others to do so as well.”

Amid Syverud’s administrative and institutional successes at Vanderbilt, he kept his focus on students—from his anti-Olympian view of the law school’s role to his insistence on teaching to his emphasis on job placement for graduates.

“Dean Syverud is really student oriented, warm and personable,” says Adam Newton, counsel in Procter & Gamble’s Corporate Securities Group in Cincinnati and a graduate of Vanderbilt University Law School. “He knew everyone’s name—all 500 of us. He really remembers students, and we remember him.”

Newton recalls his first encounter with Syverud, in 1997, when both were new to Vanderbilt: “At the orientation assembly in a dingy auditorium—this was before the renovation—he pulled out of his breast pocket an envelope that represented his last loan payment for law school 16 years earlier. Obviously he could have paid it off before, but he had spread out payments so he could continue to appreciate student sacrifices. He wanted to assure us that our three-year effort would not be wasted.”

Syverud held regular lunches to talk to students, Newton remembers. He also helped Newton and other students launch and ultimately institutionalize a journal of entertainment law at this Nashville—a.k.a. Music City—university.

Newton also enjoyed his class with Syverud: “Civil procedure could have been dry and boring, but Dean Syverud made it interesting with a lot of enthusiasm for the subject.”

Dedication and passion are apparent when Syverud talks about teaching: “I love law and enjoyed being a lawyer. Conveying that enthusiasm and the substance of what it means to effectively serve as a lawyer is what I enjoy most in the classroom.”

Although he may have to forego teaching at Washington University for a semester or so while he gets his feet on the ground administratively, Syverud is eager to get back to the lectern.

“I teach civil procedure to first-year students, and negotiation and ethics to upper-level students. Negotiation is in many ways the most fun,” he says. “It combines all the intensity of a first-year class without most of the stress, and I get to see students who are well on their way to functioning as lawyers.”

Teaching on the part of the dean, Syverud believes, is key to fostering a collegial atmosphere. “The values of the institution are taught primarily by example, by teaching,” he says.

But collegiality extends far beyond that shared duty, according to Syverud. “People must be physically present. The faculty needs to interact regularly and needs a good space for that,” something he helped achieve with Vanderbilt’s new law building.

But most important, says Syverud, is respect: “We need to listen to one another and comment substantively on what others have to write and say.”
That ties to promoting the School of Law’s scholarly mission, which Syverud describes as “one of the highest priorities. Raising the scholarly visibility of the faculty at Washington University is very important for the School as it moves forward. I will be working with my colleagues to figure out how best to achieve this in the months and years ahead.”

“[Kent Syverud] sets high standards for himself and others, and then devotes all his considerable talent to achieving them—and expects, and enables, others to do so as well.” Thomas G. Burish

That job is made easier by the School of Law’s solid foundation of scholarly success, says Syverud.

During his transition from Vanderbilt to Washington University, Syverud is squeezing in a sabbatical to spend more time with his wife, Ruth Chi-Fen Chen, a toxicologist for the state of Tennessee, and their three sons—Steven, Brian, and David.

This period of transition is only the latest in a distinguished career in law and education.

After graduating with his bachelor’s degree from Georgetown in 1977, he went on to the University of Michigan to study economics. Once there, Syverud fell in love with the law, entered law school, became editor-in-chief of the Michigan Law Review, and graduated with distinction, including earning the Order of the Coif and the Henry M. Bates Award. Only then did he finish his master’s degree in economics at Michigan.

He next served as law clerk, first to Judge Louis F. Oberdorfer of the United States District Court for the District of Columbia and then, in 1984–85, to Justice Sandra Day O’Connor of the Supreme Court, which he describes as “a very intense experience.”

After his clerkships, he went into private practice at the Washington, D.C., firm of Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering.

In 1987 Syverud returned to the University of Michigan Law School, this time as an assistant professor. He moved up to professor in 1992 and added the title of associate dean for academic affairs in 1995.

His time at Michigan resulted in his work as an expert witness on behalf of the university, supporting diversity in law school admissions. That crucial case, Grutter v. Bollinger et al., affects not only law schools, but also every college and university in the nation.

“I worked on it for five years,” says Syverud. “The Supreme Court recognized that race could be one factor in selecting students. It was an important decision for any university.”

Including Washington University’s law school, Syverud says: “This School would benefit from even greater racial diversity among the students. In recruiting students, we should be looking for the greatest potential lawyers—students from no one major or one type of background, people with strong analytic and writing skills with broad interests in the arts and sciences and the world.”

In fact, affirmative action will be on Syverud’s mind during his sabbatical, as he is penning an article on it. He’s also working on an article on law school rankings, an article titled “How Deans Should Quit,” and a book on law school teaching. In addition, Syverud is starting an empirical project related to insurance law.

He is adept at juggling his time to make room for writing. Syverud has written and published extensively in legal education. “Lately I have been writing mostly from my personal experience,” he says, “since my time for in-depth research has been limited.”

But he has also published articles on insurance litigation, dispute resolution, ethics, diversity, and more.

Once Syverud assumes his post as law school dean at Washington University, he knows there will be less time to write. “The dean’s job always comes first.”

Kent Syverud greeted the law school community following the announcement of his appointment as dean. (Top photo) He spoke with National Council member Harry Joe, JD ’75, and (bottom photo) with law students Stephen Neuman and Shannon Alexander.