Tomea Mayer Mersmann, JD ’91, has spent much of the last 15 years creatively helping her alma mater meet the challenges of a changing legal and educational environment—teaching legal writing skills, shoring up career services opportunities for students, and now helping to guide the law school’s strategic initiatives.
In 1995 alumna Tomea Mayer Mersmann had been practicing corporate and environmental law for four years at the St. Louis firm of Thompson & Mitchell when she was recruited to teach legal writing at the law school. It was the beginning of a varied and highly rewarding career at her alma mater.

Mersmann recalls that she jumped at the chance when then Acting Dean Daniel Keating offered her the full-time position. “He called me in late July and asked if I would teach the first-year legal writing course,” Mersmann says. “So within two weeks, I had quit my job at the firm and had returned to law school. But instead of being a student, I was now teaching.

“Practicing law long term was never my ultimate goal, and over time, I have found that it was actually not the best fit for my talents and skills,” Mersmann continues. “I enjoyed the intellectual challenge, but it was adversarial in most cases, and I wanted to do something that was more creative in a constructive sense.”

As a lecturer in law, Mersmann taught legal writing for two years. She then rejoined her law firm for a year as the firm-wide director of recruiting before she was again recruited to the law school in 1998 to work in the Career Services Office, where she held several positions over the next eight years, ultimately leading the office. Then in 2006, Mersmann was named to the new position of associate dean for strategic initiatives. She finds the position to be a great fit for her skills in writing, analyzing problems from different perspectives, and developing creative, logical solutions.

Kent Syverud, dean and the Ethan A.H. Shepley University Professor, developed the strategic initiatives position after joining the law school in 2006. “He’s very innovative,” Mersmann says. “When he came to the law school, he had many, many projects and ideas he wanted to initiate, but didn’t necessarily have time, himself, to evaluate the options and work on the details.”

Syverud initially tapped Mersmann for work on the law school’s strategic plan. “There are intense challenges to legal education and to the legal employment market today,” she notes. “Dean Syverud is current on all of these issues and very analytical about how they impact our school and our students.

“My varied background and skills have given me a broad perspective encompassing legal practice, legal employment, and legal education, as well as insights from being a student, alumna, lecturer, and administrator,” she says. “He asked me to employ those skills and perspectives while working on our new strategic plan.”

Mersmann also has played a key role in developing the University’s academic partnership with the Brookings Institution (see page 4), as well as creating the law school’s January Intersession and new Summer Associate in Training Program (see page 16). While Intersession brings in renowned jurists and practitioners to teach short courses in their area of expertise, the new summer program is designed to help law students hone their practical legal skills. These skills have become harder to acquire as law firms have cut summer associate positions and associate training programs during the down economy, she notes.

The summer program complements the law school’s mission of not only providing students with “an exceptional traditional legal education,” Mersmann says, but also with the knowledge and confidence “to get where they want to go professionally.”

Mersmann’s role with the Washington, D.C., initiative has included designing and setting up the University’s new facilities in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace building, as well as helping create a 15-unit, University-wide, interdisciplinary program. As a lecturer in law, she also will teach the law school’s long-standing Congressional & Administrative Law Program in the nation’s capital this fall.

Commuting to Washington, D.C., several times a month, Mersmann handled close to 18 months of negotiations with various vendors and constituents from around the University as part of the new partnership. “I continue to work with a lot of very different stakeholders trying to create a substantive program that is a win for everybody,” she says.

Mersmann believes her experience in law school helped prepare her for her current role. “The beauty of law school is that even if you are not completely sure what you want to do when you graduate, if you develop your skills and talents, when an interesting opportunity comes your way, you’re going to be ready to take it,” she says. “Law school changes the way you think—how you analyze issues and solve problems. It teaches you to break apart a situation into smaller, manageable pieces, as well as how to write well and be persuasive. Those skills are definitely transferrable to a lot of professional settings.”

Mersmann also was a good choice to develop the University-wide program with Brookings because she is a natural advocate for both the law school and the University.

“I’m a St. Louis native,” she says. “I grew up with Washington University. I’ve worked with very interesting and talented people from across the University who really care about the students and teaching, all within an outstanding educational and research environment. Working here has allowed me to remain in my hometown, but have a national and global perspective.”

Mersmann believes she has truly found her calling: “I always loved school, being around campus, working among academics, and teaching. I also love being around and contributing to innovative projects. We have a nice window to the world here, so that keeps me challenged and interested.”