Every seven years a law school has to be inspected and reaccredited by the American Bar Association (ABA), and it will be the School of Law's turn in 2004–05. This happens to coincide with the School's own self-study in preparation for its next five-year strategic plan.

"I don't recall the two combining before," says Daniel Keating, associate dean for academic affairs and the Tyrrell Williams Professor of Law. "It makes this different and exciting. We'll let the process unfold and see where it takes us.”

In some respects, however, the making of the current (1999–2004) plan can serve as a model.

"Our members will be available to provide insights gained from their years of professional experience, and continue to provide and solicit the necessary financial support that will no doubt be required to implement the new strategic plan.”

Steven Rappaport, JD '74

The committees will start by reviewing the steps taken to implement the current strategic plan and assessing the School's progress.

Accomplishments made under the current plan include the following:

- The Career Services Office and Admissions Office staffs have been augmented.
- Small-section classes are now a core component of the first-year schedule.
- An LLM program in intellectual property and technology law was added to existing graduate programs in taxation and United States law for international students.
- Students now are guaranteed a place in one of the popular clinics that offer hands-on legal training.
Two steps were taken to help with tuition: Scholarships are now awarded with a three-year commitment, and the Mel Brown Family Loan Repayment Assistance Program was established so that graduates could be free to take comparatively low-paying public service jobs.

Four new faculty members began teaching this fall, bringing the total faculty to 40.

Stipends for summer research have been doubled.

“Our School has made enormous progress since 1999,” Seligman says. Thanks in part to these initiatives, applications have doubled in four years. The percentage of accepted students who decide to attend the School is rising. Overall student satisfaction is high. And the School’s reputation among lawyers and judges is rising to match its reputation among academics. “We’re becoming a hotter school,” Keating says.

In assessing the School’s current condition, the committees will have the benefit of surveys of the National Council, faculty, senior administrators, and students conducted this past spring. There is wide agreement on strengths: faculty, leadership, and facility. Professors are particularly enthusiastic about the academic centers. Opinions differ on weaknesses, but a major one is that the School’s virtues are not well-enough known, despite recent efforts. It is still something of a “hidden gem,” Keating notes.

Faculty members stress that they need more time and support for their research and writing to enhance the School’s reputation for scholarship. Accessibility to students remains a priority as well.

“We’re clearly a school that values teaching, but also values scholarship,” Keating observes. “The challenge for the committees is determining how we continue to be one of those rare law schools that value both.”

The surveys indicate broad agreement on several potential goals for the next strategic plan: hiring and retaining good teachers, enhancing the School’s reputation, and improving job placement for students. These priorities are similar to those of the current plan, but improved job placement has gained new urgency because economic conditions now are more difficult. The costs of legal education, and the debt burden graduating students carry, loom larger.

Other questions that likely will have to be dealt with include how to allot space in a fully utilized building and how to keep up with rapidly changing information technology.

Once the issues are identified, subcommittees will be formed to address them. Members will search widely for new ideas. “A member of a subcommittee on promoting faculty scholarship might visit a law school that’s particularly successful in that area,” Keating explains. And, in keeping with the School’s multidisciplinary style, the subcommittees will look beyond law schools to business schools and other institutions.

The completed self-study will form the basis for a written report to the ABA. In addition, the ABA will require administrators to fill out numerous forms, providing information about the library, admissions process, budget, and makeup of the student body. Then, during the 2004–05 academic year, the ABA will send a team to make a site visit. They will tour the facility; sit in on classes; and interview faculty, students, and administrators. They then will write a report, of which the School will get a copy. The reaccreditation report may contain suggestions for improvement.

All this is in the future. But the committees are already beginning work on the self-study. “An up-to-date self-study will ensure that all of us have a well-informed view before drafting the next strategic plan,” Seligman says.

As administrators begin the long task, they don’t begrudge the time and effort they will have to commit to it. “The value of this process is that it makes us stop and think about how far we’ve come, where we want to go, and how to get there,” Keating notes. “There’s a saying, ‘Taking time to do what’s urgent, you don’t take time to do what’s important.’ This is doing what’s important.”

“We’re clearly a school that values teaching, but also values scholarship. The challenge for the committees is determining how we continue to be one of those rare law schools that value both.” Daniel Keating