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Jobs pulled, bar exam woes, children home: Outgoing NU Law dean on managing an unprecedented year

by Caroline Spiezio

(Reuters) - At the end of July, Northwestern Pritzker School of Law Dean Kimberly Yuracko will step down from her post after less than two years.

Her move to a role outside the law school, as Northwestern's associate provost for academic projects, comes sooner than Yuracko anticipated, she said. But the pandemic packed a lot into her tenure. Since March she's jumped from crisis to crisis, with on-campus learning, tuition dollars and student careers up in the air.

Yuracko spoke with Reuters about the uncertainties that remain, and about her own challenges as an academic leader and working mother in the pandemic. This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

REUTERS: What are concerns you're hearing from students?

YURACKO: We're hearing a stress inquiry about the economy and its impact on their future. It's sinking in that the pandemic and its economic implications are not going to end quickly.

REUTERS: Are these mostly hypothetical concerns?

YURACKO: A lot of firms are pushing back start dates. It's good that most are still planning to employ people. But pushing back the start date has implications. Our students plan their finances carefully.

REUTERS: What does firms pulling jobs mean for law schools financially?

YURACKO: We increased internal jobs and we found additional opportunities through outreach to small and mid-sized firms and legal departments. Some of those were externally funded, but we also significantly ramped up law school funding. It was critical to do that, to make sure our students had meaningful legal experience over the summer, but it is a significant budgetary expense.

REUTERS: And many schools are taking a financial hit with LL.M. programs this year.

YURACKO: Almost none of our international LL.M.s can get here for the fall at this point. The embassies are not giving visas.

REUTERS: What are students' thoughts on Northwestern's plans to partially reopen campus?

YURACKO: They want to be in-person. Our goal is to optimize the learning experience both in-person and remotely, because both are going to be different from what students are used to doing. We're going to be limited by social distancing requirements, which takes us down to about between 20 and 25% capacity for each room, plus masks.

REUTERS: Professors are generally older and higher risk than students. How do they feel about returning?

YURACKO: Things are shifting as the numbers change. At the beginning of the summer, I was feeling from our faculty members a broader optimism. A segment of my faculty for various reasons have been clear that they cannot be back in person. The much broader group is just nervous. The middle group hasn't made up their minds. There's a smaller group that strongly wants to be in person.

REUTERS: What are you hearing about the Illinois bar exam?

YURACKO: They're concerned about an online test. Many of our students, if not most, would really like diploma privilege.

REUTERS: The pandemic has also changed your own workplace.

YURACKO: Like for all working parents, it's really challenging, finding time and space - both physical and mental - to be able to focus. Pretty much anyone who was on calls with me in the spring can attest that I was often doing first grade as I was on my Zoom calls. Like, "Can you pause for a minute? Oh, yes. Let me check over all those math problems." I've never thought of myself as a great multitasker. This was challenging for me. People have been very patient and forgiving about it.

The other thing I really miss is one of the daily pleasures of being a dean, walking around the law school and having casual conversations with students and getting a sense of community. I lost that.

REUTERS: Chicago just announced that most students won't go back to school full-time in autumn. How does that impact the law school?

YURACKO: We can't expect staff and faculty to be back full-time when their kids are in school two days a week. We are going to be flexible.

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