Throughout its 125-year history, the University of Minnesota Law School has been recognized as one of the country’s premier public law schools and as an innovative leader in legal education. The success of this great law school has been built upon an enduring commitment to excellence and service—a commitment continually renewed by its exceptional students, faculty, institutional leaders, and alumni.

In 1888 the University of Minnesota established its first two professional schools, one devoted to medicine, the other to law. University President Cyrus Northrop chose as the Law School’s inaugural dean William S. Pattee, a practicing attorney and former state legislator from St. Paul. Dean Pattee was an energetic and pragmatic man—traits that would serve him well as he guided the fledgling institution.

The Law School opened in the fall of 1888 with 32 day students and 35 night students in “one small poorly ventilated room in the basement of the University’s main building.” Dean Pattee’s personal collection of legal codes, statutes, and treatises became the Law School’s first library. Within 20 years, under Pattee’s astute and deliberative leadership, the institution boasted seven full-time faculty members, a 17,000-volume library, and its own building (now known as Pattee Hall). Moreover, having accepted women and minorities since its earliest years, the Law School had a national and diverse student body of nearly 500 students by 1908. Total tuition and fees of less than $100 also proved to be an effective recruitment device.
Following Dean Pattee’s untimely death in 1911, William Reynolds Vance was appointed dean. At 41, Vance had already served deanships at two universities and taught at Yale. He wasted no time in pursuing his goal: to firmly establish the Law School as an institution of “excellence and durability.” He began by recruiting nationally recognized professors from other prominent law schools. He also persuaded Arthur C. Pulling to leave Harvard and become the Law School’s first law librarian—a move that led to the development of a truly world-class research collection. Fulfilling the goal to enhance the student educational experience, Vance led the Law School in raising admissions standards, implementing a rigorous three-year day program, establishing the Minnesota Law Review, launching one of the country’s first clinical programs, and instituting both a student government structure and an honor code. Dean Vance’s goal was to graduate students who would be knowledgeable, skilled, and ethical members of the practicing bar, imbued with the strongest commitment to professional responsibility and service to society.

When Dean Vance, in 1920, chose to return to teaching at Yale, Professor Everett Fraser was named his successor. Previously dean of the law school at George Washington University, Fraser was a distinguished scholar and a man once described by a colleague as “one of the most powerful personalities you could meet.” He led the Law School for the next 28 years, through times of sweeping social changes, economic upheaval, horrific international conflict, and monumental evolution in both the law itself and the practice of law. Dean Fraser’s vision was to make the Law School an innovative leader in legal education nationally. To accomplish his goals, Fraser continued Vance’s practice of hiring exceptional professors who enhanced the quality of an already strong faculty. He also steadfastly lobbied the University Board of Regents for funding for a new facility, and in 1928 the faculty and students moved into a new building (now known as Fraser Hall) that would house the Law School for the next 50 years. Among its features was a spacious reading room that was considered one of the most beautiful in the country. Under Fraser’s leadership, the Law School embarked on a sophisticated curricular development that led to such new courses as Legal Ethics and Judicial Administration, designed to prepare students not only to be practicing lawyers but also judges, legislators, and public servants. Equally significant was the groundbreaking “2-4” course of study, which allowed students to be admitted to the Law School after two years of college and earn both a B.S. and an LL.B. in four years at the Law School. Recognizing that lawyers would be leaders in their communities, the plan enabled the students to enroll in liberal arts courses in the final year before graduation. Known as the Minnesota Plan, this initiative was so successful that it was adopted by more than a third of the law schools in the United States.

By early 1942, within a few months of the United States’ entry into World War II, most of the Law School’s students—and eventually 4 of its 11 faculty members—left to enter military service. In 1945, after offering an abbreviated curriculum during the war, the Law School moved quickly to accommodate returning students, as well as those who had delayed beginning their legal educations. Enrollment grew by almost 500% in 1946 and reached nearly 800 students in 1948. The large enrollments at law schools nationally made it difficult to support a fourth-year class, and most institutions dropped their 2-4 plans in this postwar period.
In 1956, when Dean Pirsig assumed the helm of the Law School, he inherited a situation that required an immediate focus on financial stability. The University was facing a $400,000 deficit, and Dean Pirsig’s first challenge was to address this financial concern. He worked tirelessly to secure a $94,000 legislative appropriation and additional gifts from local and national law firms. The Law School developed highly successful, educationally oriented programs to attract and hold students, including the development of an international legal research collection from Harvard Law School as law librarians. This collection was exceptional in its breadth and depth, helping students to examine and discuss the critical legal aspects of the societal issues the nation faced.

With the increased enrollment, the Law School was able to provide financial assistance to students, and the faculty and administration addressed, with increasing generosity of local and national law firms, the Law School’s need for financial assistance. In 1971, Joyce Hughes, an African-American woman, became the first tenured woman of the law faculty. She exemplified the commitment of the Law School to diversity and inclusion.

In the 1970s, the Law School gained momentum and the Vietnam War escalated. The civil rights movement gained momentum, and the concerns of various constituencies—the state and federal government, the business community, and the academic community—were brought to the surface. The Law School addressed these concerns by increasing the number of women and students from diverse backgrounds in its student body. In 1994, Dean Stein decided to leave the Law School, leaving behind a legacy of strong leadership and significant achievements. After his departure, the Law School continued to thrive and grow, with a commitment to excellence and innovation in legal education.
Center for Business and Entrepreneurship, and the Center for Business Law. He also supported the Joint Degree Program in Law, Health & the Life Sciences and the Consortium on Law and Values in Health, Environment & the Life Sciences. Sullivan’s deanship also was marked by a highly successful development campaign, which generated substantial permanent financial support for scholarships, clinical legal education, the Law Library, technology, and faculty development. The campaign also funded the construction of a 45,000-square-foot addition to the existing building, providing much-needed space for student organizations, faculty offices, seminar rooms, community interaction, and a climate-controlled facility for the Law Library’s priceless rare book collection. At the ceremony celebrating the completion of the addition, the Law School complex was renamed in honor of Vice President Walter F. Mondale (’56).

Sullivan stepped down from the deanship in 2002 and a year later was named the University of Minnesota’s senior vice president for academic affairs and provost. On July 1, 2002, Alex M. Johnson Jr., a member of the law faculty and vice provost for faculty recruitment and retention at the University of Virginia, was appointed dean. Johnson seized timely opportunities, such as establishing a foreign study program in Beijing and initiating a laptop program that guaranteed all entering students access to the technology necessary to excel. He strengthened the Law School by hiring several prominent legal scholars, creating new institutes and centers, and expanding the number of joint degree programs. Dean Johnson also personally invested his time and energies in the founding of the Theatre of the Relatively Talentless (TORT), whose productions have become one of the Law School’s most popular annual events for students and alumni alike. Johnson’s tenure also was marked by the acquisition of the Law Library’s Millionth Volume. To commemorate this momentous achievement and the Law Library’s stature as one of the premier academic legal research facilities in the country, the Law Library purchased the papers of Clarence Darrow. It now possesses the world’s most comprehensive collection of personal writings by America’s most renowned lawyer.

When Alex Johnson’s term as dean ended in 2006, Professors Fred Morrison and Guy-Uriel E. Charles agreed to serve as interim co-deans for two academic years. Under their expert stewardship, the Law School continued to thrive, as demonstrated by the establishment of the Program in Law and History in 2007. The Law School also embarked on a redesign of the curriculum, with emphasis on responding to emerging trends in legal practice and increasing professional skills training opportunities.

With the arrival in 2008 of the tenth dean, David Wippman, former law professor and vice provost for international relations at Cornell University, the Law School entered its current era of success, excellence, and evolution. The institution continues to keep pace with—and in many ways surpass—its peers in attracting an exceptional student body, recruiting and retaining a stellar faculty, and working closely with alumni to ensure that it remains an innovative leader in legal education. The curriculum continues to evolve in a manner that effectively integrates doctrinal instruction with practice skills and professional training. With the generous support of the Robina Foundation, the Law School has been able to launch the Robina Institute of Criminal Law and Criminal Justice, an immigration law center named the University of Minnesota Law School Center for New Americans, and a Public Interest Scholars Program.

The University of Minnesota Law School’s 125th Anniversary coincides with a time of unprecedented transformation in legal education and the practice of law. The Law School is well positioned to respond to these challenges and to seize opportunities as it continues to educate exceptional students to become skilled, ethical, and dedicated members of the legal profession.

Written by Joan S. Howland, Roger F. Noreen Professor of Law and Associate Dean for Information and Technology, and Robert A. Stein, Everett Fraser Professor of Law and Dean Emeritus. Much of the information found in this text is drawn from Professor Stein’s In Pursuit of Excellence: A History of the University of Minnesota Law School (1978).

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University of Minnesota Law School
421 Mondale Hall
229 19th Ave. S.
Minneapolis, MN 55455
law.umn.edu