Chris Nicholls will help Western create a centre of excellence in business law

When Christopher Nicholls was at Harvard in the spring of 1997, he had a defining moment. It came when Robert Merton, Finance Professor (and later Nobel Prize winner in Economics), mentioned to him that he had once been involved in a sophisticated finance transaction where the lawyers involved—some of Wall Street’s brightest and best—stumbled when amending the deal documents. They didn’t fully understand why the financial economics of the deal required that documents be drafted in one specific way. “I understood the frustration he was describing,” Nicholls explains. “There is a conventional legal language and a legal paradigm, and they tend to lag the dynamic world of innovative finance.”

“Realizing there was a compelling need for experienced business lawyers to make a serious commitment to help the next generation of legal professionals integrate real-world business lawyering skills with modern financial theory and innovation,” he says. “That goal, Nicholls decided to return to Canada to teach business law.

At the time Nicholls was completing graduate work at Harvard, on leave from his law firm in Bermuda. “There are some terrific business law programs in the U.K. I want to work with other faculty members to understand why, and how their programs differ,” he says. “This culture also breeds a sense of closeness and friendship among the students.”

Now a first year professor in business law, Nicholls is looking forward to recreating the same kind of environment in his classes that he enjoyed so much when he was a Western Law student.

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Business Law, he expanded the business law curriculum, and provided over three prestigious visiting professors and visiting lecture programs. Under his leadership the School also created a business law specialization program, the first of its kind in Canada.

Nicholls was also a two-time recipient of the Excellence in Teaching Law Award, and was awarded the class ring by the graduating LL.B. class of 2000, one of his proudest accomplishments. Teaching, he says, is one of the most "selfish" of jobs, and reminds him of being a parent. "You get a chance to raise the excitement of young people finding out about things for the first time," he says. "I never got tired of that, especially when I have the luxury of teaching such tremendously bright and motivated students. It’s a very energizing experience."

With research interests in corporate finance, securities, capital markets, and the regulation of financial institutions, Nicholls is a prolific scholar. He has written five books, Corporate Finance and Canadian Law (Carwell, 2000), Securities Law (Erwin, 2002), co-written with Jeffrey MacIntosh, and Corporate Law (Emond-Montgomery, 2009). He is currently pursuing the finishing touches on a book about mergers and acquisitions, to be published by Irwin Law, and is under contract with LexisNexis for a book on regulating financial institutions.

Nicholls writes for scholarly, student and practitioner audiences. His book on securities has been used as a text by law schools across the country, whereas his book on corporate law, focused on modern financial innovation, is geared to teaching professionals. His recently published book on corporate law integrates both a doctrinal and theoretical approach, and is intended for people learning about the subject for the first time as well as young practitioners trying to bring new insights together. "My primary research interest is in the financial sector—financial institutions and the capital markets," he says, "and in particular integrating institutional and functional approaches with insights offered by modern financial economics. It’s common today for legal scholars to describe their research interests as laying on the interface of two related fields. I sometimes like to joke that my research interests lie at the intersection of King and Bay." Nicholls is looking forward to making Western Law his new home. "I know that experienced business law scholars are very much in demand at every law school—in Canada and elsewhere. What excited me about Western Law is its aspiration to make business law a centre of excellence," he says. "Western is the one and only law school in Canada—perhaps in North America—that has chosen to make its focus business law in the global environment."

Nicholls believes that Western Law’s focus on business law will benefit other programs and research interests across the Faculty as well. “Business Law in the Global Environment means much more than simply preparing people to practice on Wall Street, Bay Street or in the U.K. I want to work with other faculty members to develop exciting initiatives at Western that will enhance all areas of scholarship,” he says. “I think we can be the best business law school in the country, and also have an excellent and richly diverse curriculum in both the traditional and trend-leading fields of legal study and critical thinking. That is an exciting challenge and an important goal.”

A lifetime of law

In her first year of teaching business law, Jassmine Girgis ’04 wants to build on the Faculty’s unique culture

If life Jassmine Girgis wanted to pursue a career in law. After she finished an undergraduate degree in political science at the University of Calgary, the only thing for her to decide was what law school to attend. To help her choose, she attended a reception at a Calgary law firm to meet the Dean of Western Law. Dr. Ian Holloway. “That reception made my decision for me,” she says. “If the Dean is willing to come all the way out west to meet with potential students, maybe he reflects what the law school is like.”

Girgis found the School to be exactly what she was looking for. “Western Law is full of the warmest, most accessible faculty members I’ve ever met,” she says. “This culture also breeds a sense of closeness and friendship among the students.”

Now a first year professor in business law, Girgis is looking forward to recreating the same kind of environment in her classes that she enjoyed so much when she was a Western Law student.

When Girgis first came to Western, she thought her interests would tend toward international human rights or criminal law, areas that intrigued her. To her surprise, she soon discovered both a talent and passion for corporate and commercial law. The silver medalist, she also won awards for the highest standing on a book about mergers and acquisitions, to be published by Irwin Law, and is under contract with LexisNexis for a book on regulating financial institutions.

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