

# Widener University Commonwealth Law School

## VETERANS INITIATIVE



**HONOR. SERVICE. EDUCATION. LEADERSHIP.**

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### **THE INSPIRATION**

In 2015, when Christian A. Johnson moved from the University of Utah S.J. Quinney College of Law to become dean of the Widener University Commonwealth Law School, he noticed that there were more than a few law students on the Harrisburg campus who were veterans of military service or on active or reserve duty with the Pennsylvania National Guard, whose state headquarters is located just up the road.

He quickly realized that his new law school's location put it squarely in the center of several important military installations in addition to the Pennsylvania National and Air National Guard's home at Fort Indiantown Gap, including the United

States Army War College in Carlisle, the Army Heritage Education Center (the Army's official archive) in Carlisle, the Gettysburg National Military Park, the New Cumberland Army Depot, and the Naval Inventory Control Point in Mechanicsburg.

Dean Johnson was well aware that Widener University, the law school's parent educational institution, has an illustrious military history. Known from its founding in 1859 as the "West Point of the Keystone State," the University has long been associated with military service, changing its name from the Pennsylvania Military College only in 1972.

But it wasn't until after learning about United State Army Captain Shane Mahaffee, a 1994 alumnus who was killed in the line of duty while

serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2006, that it became obvious to Dean Johnson that Widener Law Commonwealth, as the 27-year-old, independently accredited law school in Harrisburg is known, needed to do something to honor its veteran students.

"There are approximately 20 million veterans in the United States, brave men and women who have valiantly served our country," Dean Johnson said. "Pennsylvania has the fourth largest veteran population in the country—more than a million! And in addition, we have 19,000 men and women serving in the Pennsylvania National Guard. The law school literally sits right smack in the middle of it all," he said. "It just makes sense to acknowledge and celebrate this!"



Dean Christian A. Johnson

## THE FIVE C'S OF THE WIDENER LAW COMMONWEALTH VETERANS INITIATIVE

Dean Johnson soon launched a multi-faceted program designed to make Widener Law Commonwealth the law school of choice for service members, veterans and military families. The only law school in the commonwealth's capital, Widener Law Commonwealth already offered three specialized centers of legal scholarship—the Law & Government Institute, the Environmental Law and Sustainability Center, and the Business Advising Program. With Dean Johnson's support, the school began to build its fourth area of specialization—the Widener Law Commonwealth Veterans Initiative.

The affable dean has an easy shorthand to help talk about the plan to build the Veterans Initiative—a series of strategies he calls the “five C's.”

# the Five C's

## Culture

According to Dean Johnson, the most fundamental step that the law school has taken is the commitment to create a culture of respect and camaraderie on campus for military and veteran law students and their families. This culture includes active support for the well-being of and success for military and veteran law students from admission through job placement and beyond, as well as the provision to military and veteran law students of the academic, career and financial support tailored to their unique needs and experience.

“Veteran law students are different from our average 1L,” said Dean Johnson. “They are usually older, definitely more mature, and often have a family and continuing obligations to the military or National Guard.”

He said that the transition to law school can be particularly difficult for service members coming directly from an overseas deployment or active service. “These folks are used to a very structured life; law school in many ways, apart from classes and lots of reading, is actually quite unstructured. We need to provide different kinds of orientation and mentoring to our veteran students to create the environment in which they can become successful,” he said.

Another way of helping veterans is providing them more financial assistance, and with a generous gift from Widener University Trustee Vito R. Verni, the law school has established two partial scholarships for veteran law students—the Captain Shane Mahaffee Scholarship for Excellence and The General Carl E. Mundy Jr., USMC (Ret.) and Linda Sloan Mundy Marine Scholarship Fund.

When Dean Johnson launched the initiative, Widener Law Commonwealth had already been an active participant in the Department of Veterans Affairs Yellow Ribbon Program, a voluntary program allowing universities to fund additional tuition expenses that exceed the amount of the core benefit provided by the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

## Clinic

The law school has also expanded its existing civil law clinic to include a veteran's component. The clinic simultaneously serve the area's many veterans with unmet legal needs and provide veteran and non-veteran law students alike with the opportunity to serve those who have served our country and learn more about the unique legal challenges that they face.

Throughout its 25-year history, Widener Law Commonwealth's legal

# Culture • Clinic • Center Curriculum • Community

clinic has represented thousands of low-income individuals in the areas of family law, housing, employment, bankruptcy, landlord tenant, debtor creditor, and aging. Pennsylvania veterans have these same legal needs and in participating in the clinic, Widener Law Commonwealth students gain valuable legal experience and are supervised by full-time, part-time and volunteer, licensed attorneys.

In addition, to address the rising unmet legal needs of veterans statewide brought to his attention by Pennsylvania's Lt. Governor, Mike Stack, Dean Johnson has also convened a coalition of Pennsylvania law schools. The group is working to develop practicable resource and knowledge sharing capacities and the ability to work closely with the state's veteran agencies at the federal, state and county levels.

## Center

Dean Johnson has plans for a mostly unused building on the Harrisburg campus; he wants to create a dedicated Veterans Center, a place for veterans to get together, study, and decompress from the rigors of law school studies.

There is also room for a Veterans coordinator, the Veterans Law Clinic, and potentially space for other, area veteran's organizations in need of a

central location and enhanced abilities to work collaboratively with each other and Widener Law Commonwealth.

The dean even dreams of an on-site daycare at the law school, for free or reduced fee day care services for its veteran and military families, and easy access to quality care for its other students, faculty and staff.

"Things like daycare are not often on the minds of our typical law student, who might be right out of college, or a returning student who has local family support," Dean Johnson said. "But for our military law school families who often live far from home and bring with them young children, things like convenient and affordable daycare might make all the difference in the world for making law school a reality for their family."

## Curriculum

Under the leadership of Vice Dean Michael Hussey, the law school has added classes addressing military justice and veterans' legal needs. A course on military procurement, known as "acquisitions," was taught over the 2016-17 winter intersession. This winter, the school will offer a military law class as well as a veteran's benefits primer in the summer. Retired Army Lt. Col. Kenneth Tozzi has been engaged to teach a military law overview class in the fall of

2018, which will include sections on the Uniform Code of Military Justice, military rules of evidence and procedure, and criminal law.

## Community

The law school has also ramped up the veteran-related legal programming it offers to its students and the community, including a recent one-day seminar on the innovative Veterans Court that have been created in 21 Pennsylvania counties. The program drew keynote speaker Pennsylvania Associate Supreme Court Justice Debra McCloskey Todd and eight state judges who participate in the alternative and customized solution to qualifying veterans' brushes with the criminal justice system.

The law school also holds an annual Veterans Day Ceremony on its 23-acre campus, which in 2017 featured Michael Perry, Executive Director of the Army Heritage Center Foundation in Carlisle who spoke about the evolving role of veterans in American history.

In 2016, Widener presented a one-day Military Law Symposium entitled "The Military, the Law and the Constitution," which featured topics such as the Constitution and the "War on Terror," ethics in military law, and how to better care for service members and veterans. The

keynote address was delivered by the Honorable Patrick J. Murphy, then the Acting Secretary of the Army, former United States Congressman and Widener Law Commonwealth Alumnus, Class of 1999.

In another effort to serve the veteran community, Dean Johnson chairs the legal services committee of the Veterans Task Force formed by Pennsylvania Lt. Governor Mike Stack.

## THE FUTURE

Today, Dean Johnson is busy creating his next chapter for the WLC Veterans Initiative—the Assistance to Veterans Service Organizations Program. A complement to the law school's existing corporate and business law certificate program, the new program will soon be offering one-day workshops featuring professors, attorneys and other experts and staffed by law students.

Across the country, thousands of charitable organizations have been created to serve the needs of veterans. These are organizations that help veterans find employment, education, key social services and other needs. Often, these veterans' service organizations are founded and administered by individuals without knowledge or experience in running 501(c)(3)s and ensuring compliance with all local, state and federal laws. A program that provides these organizations with the key basic information regarding forming, governing and maintaining their veterans service organizations would make these organizations more effective and eliminate potential damaging legal issues.



According to Dean Johnson, the most fundamental step that the law school has taken is the commitment to create a culture of respect and camaraderie on campus for military and veteran law students and their families.

Some of the legal services and training that will be offered include:

- Creating by-laws and other key organizational documents
- The duties of corporate officers and directors
- The role and organization of the board
- The business of corporate manage: bank accounts, contracts, licenses and similar issues
- Applying for non-profit status from the Internal Revenue Service
- The annual Form 990 and other requirements for maintaining non-profit status

- The "do's and don'ts" of charitable contributions

The law school is also in active negotiations to begin offering a procurement and acquisitions certificate program to non-attorneys, as well as a possible LLM or Master's Degree in Procurement and Acquisitions.

"We can't do enough for our veterans," Dean Johnson said. "With all of the privilege and expertise that our law school represents, there is no better way to use it than for them." 🍷