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## **In Pursuit of Public Good: NYLS's Enduring Legacy of Civic Engagement**

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**WE ARE NEW YORK'S LAW SCHOOL**



**In Pursuit of Public Good:  
NYLS's Enduring Legacy of  
Civic Engagement**

Jennifer Bancamper • Published October 02, 2024

Since its doors opened in 1891, New York Law School (NYLS) has upheld an enduring commitment to civic engagement and public discourse. Underscoring this deep-seated commitment is the distinctive environment in which NYLS thrives, where the impact of public service is felt at an unparalleled level. The Law School is adjacent to New York City's Civic Center, home to City Hall, Foley Square, several state and federal courts, and the Manhattan Municipal Building. Atop the Municipal Building is Civic Fame—a gilded statue symbolizing the government's dedication to serving New Yorkers and the inspiration behind the Law School's Civic Fame Award. This year's award was presented to the New York City Law Department in recognition of their fearless leadership through the City's toughest challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the asylum seeker crisis.

Proximity to Civic Center not only shapes NYLS's identity but also enriches its educational offerings and opportunities. Current government officials and professionals in civic affairs are regularly present on campus, participating in events, visiting classes, and directly engaging with students. The Law School proudly maintains an A+ in government law and public policy, consistently ranks among the top institutions for public service careers, and remains one of the best-represented law schools in new attorney cohorts entering City service.

**From City Hall to Lecture Halls**

When Dean and President **Anthony W. Crowell** took the helm of New York Law School in 2012, he had served for more than a decade in City Hall as Counselor to the Mayor. Much like many NYLS graduates today, Dean Crowell's career in New York City government began at the Law Department, where he was an Assistant Corporation Counsel. His civic-mindedness eventually led him to the Office of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, where he worked directly to improve New York City. One might wonder—what compelled Dean Crowell to flip the switch from government to academia? The reality is: a passion for public service is at the heart of it all.

"New York Law School has historically understood and celebrated the value and worth of lawyers in public service," says Dean Crowell. "It has inspired students to see that lawyers—who, by their very nature, engage in a life in service to others—can have deeply meaningful careers in the public sector and build for the future in compelling ways."

**Shaping the City**

In 1994, NYLS took its commitment to public service one step further when Professor **Ross Sandler** created the Center for New York City Law, now the **Center for New York City and State Law**. The Center's new name reflects its broader scope, with plans to enhance reporting, analysis, and civic dialogue on the law, government, and public policy at both the City and State levels. Dean Crowell will serve as the Center's Faculty Director, with Professor Sandler, the Samuel Seabury Professor of Law, continuing to serve as Founding Director.

Professor Sandler founded the Center aiming to promote a deeper understanding of New York's government by disseminating often-overlooked information, sponsoring events on governance topics, and proposing reforms to enhance government effectiveness and efficiency. Since arriving at NYLS, Professor Sandler has brought to bear his illustrious public service experience, which includes distinguished roles as a federal prosecutor, Special Advisor to Mayor Edward I. Koch, and Commissioner of the City's Department of Transportation. In May 2024, NYLS launched the Ross Sandler and Alice M. Sandler Fund to support students who intern for federal, state, or city government agencies.

"We want to encourage the best of our law students to consider government for their legal career," says Professor Sandler. "As was often repeated by Mayor Koch under whom I served as New York City Commissioner of Transportation, 'Public service is the most noble of professions if it's done honestly and if it's done well.' The Fund in our name will provide New York Law School students with the opportunity to experience the joy and satisfaction of working for the government."

Nestled within the Center for New York City and State Law is the one-of-a-kind **New York Elections, Census, and Redistricting Institute**, led by national redistricting expert and Distinguished Adjunct Professor **Jeffrey Wice**. Professor Wice brings over 40 years of expertise to the Institute, helping to advise the public, organizations, and government officials on best practices for federal, state, and local redistricting processes, as well as strategies for utilizing federal census data. The Institute serves as a "New York State hub," providing support and guidance on statewide projects and New York State's complex election law.



*Alice M. Sandler, Professor Ross Sandler, and NYLS Board of Trustees Chair Arthur Abbey '59 at the 2023 Abbey Hall Dedication.*



*Professor Jeff Wice speaking at the 2024 New York Redistricting conference co-sponsored by the New York Elections, Census, and Redistricting Institute.*

## Bridging Legal Education and Public Service

Beyond the Center for New York City and State Law, NYLS's commitment to civic engagement permeates every aspect of its culture. Even its motto, "We are New York's law school," stems from Dean Crowell's intent to further emphasize the School's

rich yet somewhat implicit commitment to public service. Today, that commitment is more evident than ever, with the Law School showcasing several impactful programs and initiatives related to public interest law.

The **Wilf Impact Center for Public Interest Law** has significantly expanded NYLS's public interest work, launching projects and programs aimed at utilizing the law to advance social justice and enhance the role of public interest law in students' professional development. The Center weaves together various strands of public interest lawyering, housing institutes focused on areas such as police reform, housing rights, education policy reform, and racial justice. Whether students plan to pursue public service through a community-based organization or a government agency, NYLS's curriculum is designed to equip them with the fundamental skills needed for critical work in pursuit of the greater public good.

While some legal professionals may distinguish between public interest law and government law, NYLS students are likely to explore the intersecting aspects of both throughout their legal education. This is exemplified by the work of the **Diane Abbey Law Institute for Children and Families**—an institute within the Wilf Impact Center that partners with the American Bar Association's Family Law Section to publish **Family Law Quarterly** (FLQ). Faculty Editor in Chief **Lisa F. Grumet**—who also directs the Abbey Institute and served the NYC Law Department for 16 years—guides NYLS students in serving as FLQ editors, exposing them to the interconnected aspects of public interest and government work.

"In addition to editing articles on topics such as children's educational rights, domestic violence, and child welfare, FLQ student editors update charts surveying laws in all 50 states and write about new legislation," notes Professor Grumet. "Overall, family law encompasses a wide range of practice areas in the government, nonprofit, and private sectors. Through their work in editing, conducting statutory analysis, and writing about new laws, students gain insights into the process of legislative reform. These insights benefit all students, regardless of whether they intend to go into community-based public interest work or government. FLQ graduates have worked at New York City agencies, prosecutor's offices, and nonprofit organizations, as well as in private law practices or in-house counsel positions."



*Professor Lisa F. Grumet speaking at the 2023 Abbey Hall Dedication.*

Reflecting on how her NYLS experience deepened her commitment to public service, former FLO Student Editor in Chief **Alexandra Ogunsanya '24** said, "Becoming a lawyer is the path not only to my dreams, but to helping to build the dreams of others. Throughout my time at NYLS, I've had the opportunity to nurture this passion, participating in clinics, internships, and classes centered around public interest. Being a part of the inaugural cohort of Wilf Impact Public Interest Scholars gave me the opportunity to connect with like-minded peers and faculty beginning in my first year at NYLS." Ogunsanya was the 2024 recipient of the Kathleen Grimm Medal for Distinguished Public Service, which she received during NYLS's 132nd Commencement.



*Alexandra Ogunsanya '24 sharing remarks at NYLS's 132nd Commencement.*

## The "S" Word

Students are educated on the critical roles of public servants firsthand, learning from civic leaders with deeply substantive practical experience across many areas in the public sector. This is best illustrated through State and Local Government, a course that is team-taught by Dean Crowell, who continues to serve the City as a City Planning Commissioner. His co-teachers include **Hon. Anthony Cannataro '96**, Associate Judge and former Acting Chief Judge of the New York State Court of Appeals; Senior Associate **Dean Matt Gewolb**, the former Legislative Director of the New York City Council; and **Stephen Louis**, Distinguished Adjunct Professor at NYLS and Distinguished Fellow and Counsel to the Center for New York City and State Law. Professor Louis formerly served the NYC Law Department as Executive Assistant Corporation Counsel and Chief of the Legal Counsel Division.

The course predominantly offers modules on the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of New York State and City government, providing a framework for examining important issues and topics intersecting law and public policy at large. This approach reflects the fact that, given New York City's designation as the world's capital, the functions and decisions of its government serve as models for governments around the globe. Dean Crowell aptly captures this phenomenon with a simple yet poignant "S" word—scale.

"When you work on behalf of New York City, by the very nature of what you're asked to do, you're working at a scope and scale that's almost incomparable," Dean Crowell explained. "We prepare students to understand the impact of government at maximum scale, and that prepares them to not only be effective when they're in practice in New York City or State, but anywhere else

they go. The old saying, 'If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere,' really means something."

When it comes to effectively preparing students for civic leadership, Dean Crowell strives to teach students not only what the law is, but why it exists. "Without understanding the history of how our laws became what they are today, it will be almost impossible to effectively shape law and policy for tomorrow," he notes. As to which core values he hopes to instill in NYLS students, the answer aligns with his four pillars of good government: transparency, integrity, accountability, and independence.



*Hon. Anthony Cannataro '96 speaking at the 2022 Hall of Judges Ceremony.*



*Sr. Associate Dean Matt Gewolb (second from right) with NYLS students at the U.S. Capitol.*

## Out in the World

The cultivation of NYLS's tradition of civic engagement extends far beyond the School's classrooms. Under Dean Crowell's leadership, experiential learning programs have expanded, allowing students to actively engage in government affairs. Through clinics, internships, and externships in diverse government agencies—such as the Law Department, City Council, and several District Attorney offices, among others—students engage with civic activities at an incredibly broad level.

The NYC Gotham Honors Externship, connecting academic learning to practice, provides unparalleled legal training in some of the City's most influential agencies. Additionally, students are prepared to tackle the distinctive challenges and responsibilities of government practice outside of New York City through the Washington, D.C. Honors Externship. Dean Gewolb, Faculty Director of Externship Programs and architect of these initiatives, notes how integral these experiences are for NYLS students.

"The Washington, D.C. Honors Externship is a cornerstone of our mission to prepare NYLS students for impactful careers in public service," says Dean Gewolb. "By immersing students in the heart of the federal government, the D.C. externship provides invaluable hands-on experience and a deep understanding of civic engagement at the national level. Our curriculum is intentionally designed to bridge academic theory with real-world practice, ensuring that students not only learn about the intricacies of federal law but also understand their role in shaping public policy and advancing the public good."

## Big Apple, Bigger Impact

NYLS has been intertwined with the fabric of public service since its earliest days. Many of the School's inaugural alumni ascended to the highest echelons of government, serving as governors, U.S. Senators, and judges. Notably, three alumni consecutively rose to assume New York City's highest political office of Mayor, each leaving a lasting mark on the city's landscape. Mayor John P. Mitchell, Class of 1902, championed anti-corruption, a cause he fervently pursued during his time as an Assistant Corporation Counsel. Mayor John Hylan, Class of 1897, laid the groundwork for the NYC subway system, which now serves as a vital link connecting NYLS students to all corners of the five boroughs. Jimmy Walker, Class of 1904, changed the City's landscape more literally, overseeing the creation of the Sanitation Department and spearheading initiatives to enhance city parks and playgrounds.

Ironically, the nearly two-decade-long era of NYLS graduates occupying the mayor's office came to an end at the hands of another NYLS alumnus—Judge Samuel Seabury, Class of 1893, who was dedicated to ridding the government of corruption. Seabury, who also served as a Court of Appeals judge, has a legacy of public service that is immortalized alongside that of many others in NYLS's Hall of Judges, a tribute to the hundreds of alumni who have served at all levels of the judiciary. The homage includes Roger J. Miner, Former Senior Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, and John Marshall Harlan II, Former Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Also featured is Hon. Anthony Cannataro '96, who was honored at the Law School's 2022 Hall of Judges Ceremony. A leading legal figure, Judge Cannataro made history as the first openly LGBTQ+ Acting Chief Judge in the nation's 50 states. He recently joined NYLS as a distinguished adjunct professor to co-teach State and Government Law with a focus on New York State constitutional law. His arrival parallels a critical period for budding lawyers; with recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions deferring more responsibility and lawmaking to the States, it's now more vital than ever for new lawyers to understand the intricacies of State constitutions.

## Embracing Change to Pave the Road Ahead

For the past 133 years, NYLS alumni have passionately embodied the impact of its enduring legacy of civic engagement. But it's crucial to consider—amidst a period when society, the economy, and technology are undergoing historically rapid changes, what lies

ahead for students of the coming century? Ben Max, Executive Editor and Program Director for the Center for New York City and State Law, notes that, in an ever-evolving city like New York, it's imperative that NYLS continues to nurture its tradition of civic engagement thoughtfully and innovatively.

"As we look to the future, the Center for New York City and State Law aims to engage current public sector officials in constructive dialogue and to empower the next generation of civic leaders to tackle many challenges across government, policy, and law," says Max. "We are charting the Center's next phase as a civic engagement hub connecting the NYLS community with the City and State government and the broader civic-minded public. Our work will ensure that NYLS continues to graduate so many highly qualified and committed professionals who enter public service and contribute to a better city, state, and country."

Looking ahead, NYLS remains steadfast in its commitment to fostering a culture that promotes honest, thoughtful, and innovative civic engagement. With a rich history, a vibrant present, and a promising future, the Law School continues to inspire the next generation of lawyers, whether they pursue public service or not, to approach the challenges of tomorrow with passion and purpose.

"To me, the greatest outcome is to inspire our students to be the next generation of lawyers and leaders and managers, but also to seek elective office and to have the courage to stand up to forces that are counter to our democracy or counter to the interests of all New Yorkers," says Dean Crowell. "I want our students to always feel inspired by our programs and motivated to make a difference, regardless of the path they take into the profession. We will always be there to support them."



Dean and President Anthony W. Crowell welcoming new students at 2024 Orientation.



Center for NYC and State Law Executive Editor and Program Director Ben Max alongside Dean Crowell.



## Shaping NYC: NYLS Alumni in Action at the Law Department

Hear from alumni serving the City through the NYC Law Department about the invaluable experiences they had at NYLS that helped shape their legal careers.



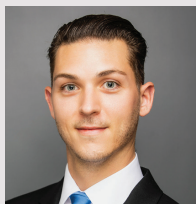
**Ross Lazicky '22**

"I didn't hesitate to take part in the different student organizations, co-curricular programs, and experiential learning programs offered at NYLS. Each of those opportunities gave me the experience and insight related to the day-to-day work of a public servant and exposed me to a network of like-minded individuals. That was invaluable as I entered my professional career."



**Bryn Ritchie '22**

"The myriad opportunities at NYLS to practice and develop lawyering skills were instrumental in building my confidence as a new lawyer. Clinics and other co-curricular activities provided excellent avenues for developing practical skills in a supportive learning environment. Students who are practicing their lawyering skills while still in law school are sure to stand out in professional settings."



**Jeffrey Noll '22**

"If a student intends to pursue a career in public service, they should take the opportunity to intern for a government agency to find a practice area that they're passionate about. Working in public service presents the opportunity to directly apply your legal skills and gain experience quickly. Public agencies also offer many different career paths that allow young lawyers to grow professionally while contributing to the public's benefit."



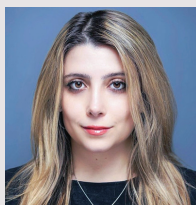
**Sabrina T. Smith '22**

"One of the highlights of my time at NYLS was joining the Moot Court Association (MCA) during my 2LE year. Each semester, I had the opportunity to participate in an external competition and moot both sides of an issue. Some of my best competition experiences came about when I imagined that my client was standing next to me listening to the arguments made on their behalf. MCA not only taught me how to be an effective oralist but also emphasized the importance of zealous advocacy for the client. This experience greatly influenced my decision to pursue a litigation career in public service. It is a privilege to practice as an Assistant Corporation Counsel at the NYC Law Department."



**April Pacis '22**

"If I were to share one piece of advice with students pursuing public interest law, I'd tell them to get as much experience as possible in different areas of public service to ensure they know what they want to do. Any new law student might surprise themselves with what they end up enjoying as they explore NYLS's internships, externships, and clinics!"



**Julia Porzio '22**

"As someone pursuing public interest work, it was essential for me to participate in the clinics and pro bono programs NYLS offered. I obtained practical skills that aren't typically taught in a classroom, such as preparing discovery, attending court calendar calls, handling caseloads, and more. I participated in the Criminal Prosecution Clinic at the Manhattan District Attorney's Office, the Courtroom Advocates Project, Moot Court, and Family Law Quarterly. I gained invaluable experience from each one."



**Adam Tynan '22**

"New York Law School does a fantastic job of preparing their students for the working world by giving them true hands-on experiences while in law school. For me personally, interning at the New York City Law Department for a year through the NYLS Tort Municipal Defense Civil Litigation Clinic taught me the 'put your head down and work' mentality. Employers hiring NYLS graduates know they will get determined and hard-working people."