

UW-Madison: Mnookin brings deep experience, wide perspective to UW-Madison role

Posted on Monday, May 16, 2022

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

MADISON — Every incoming University of Wisconsin-Madison leader professes to understand the Wisconsin Idea, the guiding principle that the activities of the university should have a positive and lasting impact on the state and world.

Chancellor-designee Jennifer L. Mnookin, who on Monday was named the 30th leader of UW-Madison, grasps it in a deeply personal way.

Eighteen months ago, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mnookin donated a kidney to her father, Harvard law professor Robert Mnookin. A transplant solution developed at UW-Madison allowed the organ to be shipped from Los Angeles to him in Boston for successful transplantation. He's doing well today.

Following her visit to campus and meetings with shared governance in early May, she was struck by the commitment to the Wisconsin Idea and the spirit of the academic community that she'll be joining on Aug. 4.

"There are two things that make this place so special. One is just the incredible range of research activities across so many fields at such a high level," Mnookin says. "The second is just how much people care about each other, the community and the institution. From the students I met with to faculty to staff, there were an enormous number of people who clearly really care about this institution and making it as strong as possible.

"That makes me just incredibly excited and inspired to become a Badger," she notes, adding that she feels deep appreciation both to the Board of Regents for

selecting her and to outgoing Chancellor Rebecca Blank for her years of leadership.

While Mnookin offers perspective on and understanding of UW and the opportunities it offers, current and former colleagues went out of their way to share accounts of the leadership attributes that make her a match for a new role.

Those who know her best credit Mnookin with being a transformative leader at UCLA, fully prepared to transition from a successful deanship into the chancellor role of a public research university.

"Jennifer was born to be the leader of a great research university like the University of Wisconsin," says University of Oregon President Michael Schill, who previously served as UCLA Law School dean. He worked with Mnookin while she was on the Law School faculty and serving as UCLA's vice dean for faculty and research from 2007 to 2009 and vice dean for faculty recruitment and intellectual life in 2012-13.

"She is incredibly smart, strategic, inspiring, warm and collaborative," he adds. "She has been an amazing dean of one of the nation's best law schools and has moved it dramatically forward in a short period of time."

Through initiatives and centers, the UCLA School of Law has attempted to address major societal issues facing California and the nation, such as immigration, human rights, electronic privacy and regulation of new technologies.

Mnookin founded and co-directs UCLA's Program on Understanding Law, Science & Evidence (PULSE @ UCLA Law) and her publications have focused on issues relating to forensic science, such as fingerprint identification, handwriting expertise and DNA evidence.

Mnookin has elevated the school in every respect, with a focus on access and excellence, says Michael Levine, UCLA's interim executive vice chancellor and provost.

"Under her leadership, the school has enhanced the quality and diversity of the faculty; seen an increase in the credentials and diversity of the student body; set records for philanthropic support; built and expanded impactful, innovative programs in several disciplines; and achieved its highest-ever rankings," he says.

"Throughout, Dean Mnookin has shown a steadfast commitment to connecting with and supporting students, and doing as much as possible to sustain community,

especially during the pandemic,” Levine adds.

She has also taken multiple steps to address diversity and climate within the school, he explains.

During her deanship she has created a substantial number of endowed student scholarships, including: the Achievement Fellowship Program, which provides full tuition for high-achieving students who have overcome significant life obstacles; the first endowed Black Law Students Association scholarship; and the Graton Scholars initiative for students from Native Nations or who are dedicated to tribal advocacy.

One of her chief strengths may be her talents across the many facets of her responsibilities, says Ann Carlson, chief counsel of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and UCLA’s Shirley Shapiro Professor of Environmental Law.

“One of the hallmarks of her leadership, for me, is just how good she is at so many parts of the job. She’s a great manager, a great strategist, a great fundraiser, a great teacher, a great colleague, a great scholar, a great institution builder. I could go on and on.”

Mnookin says she won’t shy away from challenges ahead and describes an engaged leadership style that will draw in an array of voices in an effort to solve problems.

“I’m definitely a leader who doesn’t think that I always know best,” she says. “I believe that the best decisions come through engagement with others, and the willingness to listen. That said, I will make tough decisions and recognize that there are times when you’re unable to make everybody happy.”

“Vision comes through collaboration and engagement — working together to find common purpose,” she adds. “We will look for ways to improve the institution that you love, and that I am coming to love.”

“No one has worked harder with more creativity and commitment to collaboration on behalf of the Law School than Jennifer,” adds William Boyd, Michael J. Klein Chair in Law and faculty co-director of the Emmett Institute on Climate Change and the Environment.

Outside of her UCLA activities, in 2020, Mnookin was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, serves on the advisory board of the Electronic Privacy Information Center and as a board member and chair of the investment

committee of the Law School Admissions Council. She served for six years on the National Academy of Sciences' Committee on Science, Technology and Law, and co-chaired a group of senior advisors for a President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology report on the use of forensic science in criminal courts.

She received her A.B. from Harvard University, her J.D. from Yale Law School, and a Ph.D. in History and Social Study of Science and Technology from M.I.T. Prior to joining UCLA Law, Mnookin was professor of law and Barron F. Black Research Professor at the University of Virginia School of Law. She was also visiting professor of law at Harvard Law School.

Lawyers are uniquely positioned to be leaders and consensus builders, she notes.

"Lawyers have to listen carefully," she says. "They have to think strategically. They are, fundamentally, trained as problem solvers and sometimes have to persuade people that don't necessarily see the world the way they do. They also have to be willing to engage across difference and think seriously about alternative points of view. I do think those are qualities that I will bring to this role as chancellor."

Outside of her work on campus, you might soon find Mnookin walking out to Picnic Point, exploring the Lakeshore Nature Preserve, or on a local segment of the Ice Age Trail — or even exploring the culinary scene of South Central Wisconsin.

Her husband, Joshua Foa Dienstag — a nationally recognized scholar of political science and law at UCLA — will accompany her and also join the UW-Madison faculty.

"We spend a lot of time hiking in California. We are very excited to explore some of the trails of Wisconsin," Mnookin says. "We're foodies. We like cooking and also enjoy trying new dishes both in restaurants and at home"

Complete details are located at <http://chancellorsearch.wisc.edu>