

GUIDED BY VALUES, GROUNDED IN COMMUNITY

When Vice Dean Hannah Brenner Johnson joined the California Western faculty in 2016, she was drawn by more than just sunshine and a change of scenery. “I was really attracted to ... the mission of the law school,” she recalled. “I knew Cal Western had a reputation for enrolling a diverse student body, providing exceptional educational opportunities for students, and turning out practice-ready lawyers into the community,” she said. It wasn’t just the mission that stood out to her. “The faculty was very impressive to me, especially their commitment to excellence in teaching and their production of innovative and meaningful scholarship.”

From day one, she saw herself not only as a professor but also as part of a larger transformation. “If I took this job at California Western, I would really have the opportunity to shape the future of the school,” she was told during her hiring process. That idea stuck. And by the time she stepped into the role of vice dean just three years later, she was doing just that.

It wasn’t what she expected, but then again, few things in life are. “That was really not part of my plan,” she said, “but that’s how it ended up and I have no regrets.” Over her nine years at the school, Brenner Johnson spent more than half of them in a leadership position. From a global pandemic to two dean transitions, she became, by her own modest admission, “a stabilizing force.”

That flexibility is part of what makes California Western special. “We are constantly changing and thinking and growing. As an independent school, we have a nimbleness that allows us to innovate and adapt to the changing legal landscape,” Brenner Johnson said. “Some things remain unchanged: We provide access to legal education to a cohort of students with a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and



interests, and over the course of their three years in law school, we help them become practice-ready lawyers.”

Experiential learning has always been central to Brenner Johnson’s approach. Long before she arrived at California Western, she worked on expanding real-world opportunities for law students and found a natural alignment with the school’s values. “I had the opportunity to really build a framework for the practical training of students,” she said about her work at a prior institution. At California Western, that philosophy was already deeply rooted. “I can’t take credit for building that aspect of our curriculum,” she said, “but I certainly believe in it and have done what I can to sustain and grow our experiential programs.”

Her passion is especially clear when she talks about getting students real experience before they graduate. It still shocks her that, for much of the profession’s history, “we sent lawyers out into the world without practical training.” To her, experiential learning isn’t just nice to have, it’s foundational. It builds confidence, reinforces the importance of professionalism and legal ethics,

and prepares students for the complex realities they’ll face once they become licensed attorneys.

That instinct to challenge outdated systems and push for meaningful progress isn’t limited to the classroom. She brought that same depth of inquiry and sense of purpose to her scholarship, most notably her book *Shortlisted: Women in the Shadows of the Supreme Court*. The result of a ten-year collaboration, the book chronicles nine women who were shortlisted for the court before Justice Sandra Day O’Connor’s appointment. “These women may not be real-life mentors, but they have mentored me and inspired me just by learning about their personal and professional lives,” she said.

The research left a lasting impression, not just as a scholarly pursuit but as a deeply personal journey. In uncovering the lives of these nine women, Brenner Johnson found herself reflecting on her own role in legal education and leadership, and how progress is built step by step, often by people whose names don’t always make the headlines.

As she prepares for her next professional chapter, returning to her home state of Illinois as the next dean of Southern Illinois University Simmons Law School, Brenner Johnson leaves behind more than a list of titles or milestones. She leaves a legacy of steady leadership, thoughtful scholarship, and a vision for what legal education can be when it’s rooted in access, purpose, and real-world impact.

Dean Brenner Johnson may be leaving the school, but she’s left a legacy of strength, stability, and empathy. “I’m more than content to be behind the scenes supporting others to go out and do good work,” she said. And that’s exactly what she’s done.