

Duquesne's Kline Center to helm new partnership between Pa. courts, law schools

Thanks to a \$7.5 million donation from a law school alumnus, Duquesne University will collaborate in a first-of-its-kind partnership to provide continuing education courses for judges in the Pennsylvania court system.

The university on Tuesday announced the creation of the Thomas R. Kline Center for Judicial Education, named for the 1978 graduate of the law school and a founding partner of the firm Kline and Specter. The center will collaborate with the other eight law schools across the state and the Pennsylvania Unified Court System to offer courses now required annually for about 600 Pennsylvania judges.

“This is a new vision of pro bono on a giant scale in a state where we’re harnessing all of the expertise and talent in all of the law schools,” said Duquesne University President Ken Gormley. “We’re all coming together to work on something that benefits the profession.”

Mr. Gormley, who led the Duquesne University School of Law until he became the university president in 2016, said the idea for a judicial education center has been something he and others have considered for years.

Under a December 2016 order from the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, all state judges are required to take 12 credits of continued judicial education each year.

The new partnership between the court system, the Kline Center and other law schools will help make the required credits more accessible for jurists across the state, as well as offer courses and seminars in fields such as ethics, psychology, science and health. A judge in Western Pennsylvania, for instance, may want additional classes in science to assist with decisions they make in land use cases related to fracking, Mr. Gormley said.

“Our goal is to assure that judicial officers in Pennsylvania have the requisite skills and knowledge to fulfill their judicial responsibilities with integrity, adherence to the rule of law, and the highest standards of ethical behavior,” Chief Justice Thomas G. Saylor of the state Supreme Court said in a statement.

There has been a “national push” for several years for more accessible continuing education for judges, Mr. Gormley said. Lawyers are already required to take certain annual credits.

But currently the only options for local judges pursuing more education is the National Judicial College in Reno or courses through the Pennsylvania State Conference of Trial Judges, and those can be expensive, Mr. Gormley said.

Through the Kline Center, judges will be able to take their four “core courses” through the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts as well as other courses in various fields in different locations across Pennsylvania and free of charge, Mr. Gormley said.

The university will begin the process of hiring an executive director to lead the Kline Center and hopes to launch new programming in 2018.

“Everything just fell into place in a magical fashion,” said Mr. Gormley. “This is a pro bono project where we’re doing this for the good of the commonwealth and the profession. It’s rare in life that you get to do something that makes such a positive impact long after you’re gone.”