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## 15 Minutes With Kentucky State University's General Counsel

By **Michele Gorman**

Law360 (August 31, 2020, 11:48 AM EDT) -- As some classes are underway in-person at Kentucky State University, general counsel Lisa Lang and other school officials are expecting everyone there to realize how much is at stake during the pandemic — especially as a handful of colleges around the country already have sent students home for remote learning just days after welcoming them back to campus.



**Lisa Lang**

**Currently:** General counsel, Kentucky State University

**Previously:** General counsel, Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board

**Law school:** Louis D. Brandeis School of Law

In a recent interview with Law360, Lang said her legal team worked hand-in-hand with senior leaders to reach the university's decision, which gave the students the choice of in-person or remote classes this fall. The host of issues they considered not only concerned the students but also faculty, staff, contractors and campus visitors, she said.

Here, she explains more about the university's plan. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

### Given the pandemic, what's the status of the university's fall semester?

We worked diligently through the summer to prepare the campus for the hopeful return of our students. We were able to open our campus up to our students in the last few weeks. Class officially started on Aug. 15, and the first full day of classes started on Aug. 17. Staff at this time is at 20%.

I've continued to work on campus throughout the summer, but my staff has been working remotely. Now they are still working remotely, but we are rotating in so that I have people in my office. As other offices are doing, we're bringing in people at least one day a week and, in some cases, more than that.

We're diligent to make sure that we don't have too many people here, we are all following the appropriate social distancing, and we're taking all the precautions necessary on the staff side.

### Are all students back?

There is a hybrid plan. Our president called it the BREDS Choice. He shared with us that he envisioned it to be like Burger King and "have it your way": He wanted to give people the option of choosing how they wanted their instruction to be delivered.

There are various options that could be chosen. You could theoretically stay at home and do your learning completely online. You could come to campus, and theoretically you could take all online classes but still be on our campus and take advantage of the support services that we provide for our students. Or you could try to take as many in-person classes as you wanted.

## **What has the university implemented to monitor people's health?**

We did publish BREDS Back on the Hill [reopening plan for fall 2020]. That document outlines what the expectation is for everybody. We expect our students and our staff and or faculty to all engage in self-assessments.

For a large part, it is voluntary. It's what we expect everybody to do as a community to contribute to a safe environment. We all have to take training as it relates to things — hand-washing, social distancing, what kind of mask is appropriate — to keep everybody safe.

Everybody is expected to do self-assessments. And we're providing training to people to help them to make sure that they're doing what we expect them to every day to keep everybody safe and to know the signs of when they may have issues with COVID so that they can report appropriately and then we can take steps. We need to make sure not only that they're taken care of, but that anybody they've been in contact with can be alerted and can be taken care of.

## **Is there anything in particular that you're worried about for the next few months?**

I really don't think that there's anything in particular that I am worried about. We just have to be vigilant, and I hope that everybody continues to do what I have seen them doing over the last few days, which is working very hard together to make sure that we are doing what we need to do in order to keep our doors open.

You're seeing things in the news right now where you've got schools that have gone back for two weeks. I really hope and believe that our students understand how much is at stake. If they want to be here, then we've really got to work together to make sure that they can stay here and we can continue to provide the support that we can provide them while they're on campus as long as we all do our part.

## **Are you worried about the legal industry putting diversity and inclusion efforts on the back burner as businesses and law firms start to emerge from the pandemic?**

Because we are an HBCU [historically black colleges and universities], diversity and inclusion is always at the forefront of our thoughts and our planning and our discussions.

I can't speak for anybody outside of our organization, but what I can say is that we work very, very hard every day in order to evaluate how it is that we are hiring staff to make sure that even on an HBCU there is diversity and inclusion.

We also look in terms of our recruiting efforts to make sure. There was a time where Black students only had the option of coming to places like Spelman College, Howard University, Kentucky State University. But they don't have those limited choices anymore; they have other choices. We want to continue to make sure that we have a campus that has the kind of diversity that they expect so that they can have this HBCU experience.

What we've also done from a legal office perspective is we are participating with Diversity Lab's Mansfield Rule. To the extent we lack diversity in my office, we would lack diversity because we have no men. We are completely female and we have very diverse backgrounds in our office, which I think is wonderful and I really love that. We're looking at diversity and inclusion with our outside counsel.

## **What is one critical trait that is necessary for a successful general counsel?**

I think you have to have the ability to be flexible and to be nimble.

## Did you acquire those traits in the role?

I think that in large part I already had some of those qualities and traits, and I understood the importance of them.

The very first job that I ever had was in the military. I understand the importance of understanding what the mission is, understanding what your role in the mission is, understanding generally what the goal is. But I also understood that you don't know everything; you are not always going to get a lot of notice before something needs to happen; you have to do the best that you can do with the information that you have; and you always have to be prepared to pivot and to reassess and to change directions at a moment's notice.

I really do believe that that ability started because of serving in the military, and I've cultivated it.

## What's a fact about you that might not be obvious from a Google search?

My mother is Canadian. She's a naturalized citizen now. My grandparents were from Canada. And I have a daughter who just married a young man whose family was from Mexico originally. I feel like we are a very international family.

*Check out Law360's other general counsel interviews as part of our "**15 Minutes With**" series.*

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.

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