A New Rector, A New Era

Bernhard Ehrenzeller is a professor of public law and an expert in the Swiss constitutional law. As of February 2020, he starts as a new rector of HSG. What is the key mission of the university? What is the role of economics at a leading business school? Where is HSG in ten years from now?

What is your personal specialization in teaching and research? What are the most important milestones in your career?

My research revolves around many facets of Swiss constitutional law, from the intricacies of our federal system to fundamental questions of the direct democracy and the Swiss governmental system. It is particularly rewarding when my research shapes legal practice - or even the Constitution as such: my postdoctoral work focused on the way parliament can influence foreign policy. Eventually, I became involved in the drafting of the new Federal Constitution and especially in the very article that addresses this question. In the same vein, I enjoyed pursuing my research at inspiring venues such as the Fletcher School and guiding many first-year students through our Constitution. Outside academia, I was honored to serve on the bench of Liechtenstein’s Constitutional Court for nearly twenty years.

Do you want HSG to be a leading institution in academic research or an excellence center for teaching? Do you see the right balance in teaching, research, public outreach and administrative engagement?

The modern university as it has been envisaged by Wilhelm von Humboldt strives to combine both, research rigor and excellence in teaching. Although we all are aware that this is an ambitious goal, it is key to constantly work towards it, as we declare in our Roadmap 2025: Not only do we want to offer holistic teaching, we also want to combine academic excellence with practical relevance in our research. The latter requires us to seek solutions for society’s most pressing issues. By rewarding excellent research just as much as achievements in public outreach and administrative engagement, we try our best to strike a viable balance.
What’s the role of economics at a leading business school? Is it a ‘must have’ or a ‘nice to have’?
A business school without economics is unthinkable for me, particularly at a university that promotes an integrative understanding of the economy: how do societies deploy limited resources, how do labor markets function, and what effects do trade policies have - all students benefit from pondering these questions, no matter what career they choose. As a lawyer, I often hear how the economic education of our law graduates is an asset. Economics is certainly not the easiest subject to study, but worth the time and effort. Thankfully, our students can count on a faculty that is both dedicated to the highest quality of both teaching and research, as they are engaged in many projects that help us all make better sense of the world as such.

The university will soon be given a new constitution (‘University Law’). Does HSG need a big overhaul in corporate governance? What are the major changes to be expected?
Our university has grown substantially over the past decades, warranting discussions regarding its governance. While some adjustments are necessary, e.g., in the structure of our non-tenured faculty (Mittelbau), we will retain what has made us a dynamic and successful institution in the first place: the autonomy of our university as a whole and that we grant our institutes, a hallmark of our entrepreneurial spirit. With stronger compliance guidelines and oversight mechanisms, we will be able to hold onto this culture of trust and autonomy that also benefits our students who are interested in research driven by business partnerships.

You served more than 20 years as a professor of the university. What were the most important changes in the past? Where do you see the university in ten years?
Nearly 20 years ago, we underwent the most fundamental reforms in higher education, the Bologna process. The University of St.Gallen was Switzerland’s pioneer by welcoming the first Assessment students in 2001. This pioneering spirit will also define us in ten years: in the fall, the first medical students will join our campus community; students of computer science will soon follow. We keep innovating, while staying true to our HSG core mission.

For more information please visit Rektorat or write to Bernhard.Ehrenzeller@unisg.ch.