Villanova University School of Law has landed a $25 million gift and a new name in honor of the alumni donor.

University officials announced Wednesday that the school will now be known as the Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law. Widger, the founder of investment-management firm Brinker Capital Inc., graduated from the Philadelphia law school in 1973 and serves on its board of consultors.

“I have an interest in higher ed, because I think it transforms lives and serves broader communities,” Widger said in an interview Wednesday.

He said his time at Villanova Law helped him choose to specialize in tax law; gave him the confidence to found his own company; and spurred him to serve on numerous not-for-profit boards—each of which have brought professional and personal benefits.

Brinker Capital managed $130 million in assets when Widger founded it in 1987. It now manages $18 billion and employs 150.

“My law degree gave me the confidence and competence to get out of my comfort zone and make some different kinds of decisions,” he said.

The $25 million donation is the largest in the law school’s history, and the second-largest ever for the university. The bulk of the funds establish an Endowed Scholars Program, which will provide scholarships to incoming students with an interest in both business and law. The law school doesn’t
yet know how many students will receive the scholarships annually, but aims to make them available to next fall’s incoming class, said dean John Gotanda.

“One of the biggest concerns for students is that law school isn’t affordable,” Gotanda said. “Chuck wants to make sure that students have the opportunity to have a Villanova Law education. Having the money put toward scholarship is very important to him.”

Widger’s donation will also endow an interdisciplinary professorship for an academic with expertise in the law and another area—the first of its kind within the university. “Law today isn’t practiced in a vacuum,” Gotanda said. “Lawyers work with accountants, engineers, nurses and communications people. Having someone who spans more than one college, I think, is important to the university and the law school.”

The gift also will fund the so-called Dean’s Innovation Fund, to spur new academic initiatives.

Widger helped the law school develop and implement a strategic plan focused on business law and entrepreneurship. All students are now required to complete a weeklong course on business literacy, where they learn to read a balance sheet and income statement, among other things. Second-year students are required to complete a weeklong course on the business of law covering the economics of law practice. The school is also considering a course teaching students how to counsel boards and leaders, as well as to serve on boards themselves, Gotanda said.

Widger previously donated seed money to help launch both the law school’s Center for Ethics, Integrity and Compliance, and its Center for Law and Entrepreneurship in 2013. That center now houses the school’s entrepreneurship clinic.

“I’ve watched the current administration and dean Gotanda develop this innovative legal education strategy,” Widger said. “As they moved along and got through the execution process, I could see clearly it was working. I felt I could really move the needle if I made a big commitment here and could benefit a lot of the students and the communities they serve.”

Widger’s gift is the latest in a string of donations to the law school. It launched a $50 million capital campaign, and raised $31 million in the quiet phase before going public in October, Gotanda said. The latest donation brings the school’s total to $56 million, he said.

Interest in the law school also appears to be picking up, Gotanda said. Applications were up 16 percent last year and are on track to increase again this year.

Gotanda doesn’t expect much pushback from alumni on the school’s name change, saying naming rights depended on finding the “right fit.”

“I can’t think of a better face of Villanova Law than Chuck Widger,” Gotanda said. “He’s an outstanding individual. He proud, active and invested in Villanova.”

A growing number of law schools have been renamed for donors in recent years. In October, Northwestern University renamed its law school the Northwestern Pritzker School of Law after receiving $100 million from alumnus J.B. Pritzker, co-founder and managing partner of the Pritzker Group investment firm, and his wife M.K. Pritzker.

Contact Karen Sloan at ksloan@alm.com. For more of The National Law Journal’s law school coverage, visit: http://www.facebook.com/NLJLawSchools.

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