

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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History-Making Former California Appellate Justice Halim Dhanidina Named Dean of Western State College of Law

First Muslim Judge in California History to Lead Orange County's Oldest Law School into a New Era



TUSTIN, Calif. (May 27, 2026) — Western State College of Law at Westcliff University, an ABA-approved institution and the oldest law school in Orange County, Calif., today announced the appointment of Justice Halim Dhanidina (Ret.) as its next Dean and Professor of Law, marking a defining moment in the institution's evolution.

A former Justice of the California Court of Appeal and the first Muslim judge in California history, Dean Dhanidina brings to Western State a rare combination of judicial leadership, courtroom experience and academic engagement, positioning the college at the forefront of a rapidly transforming legal education landscape.

His appointment represents both a historic milestone and a forward-looking investment in the future of legal education. During his tenure on the California Court of Appeal, Second District, Dean Dhanidina became the first South Asian American justice in California history and the first Muslim appellate-level judge in the United States. These distinctions reflect a career defined by excellence, leadership and a deep commitment to broadening access within the legal profession.

Western State's longstanding role in expanding access to legal education is central to its impact on the profession, a legacy Dean Dhanidina says drew him to the institution.

"Western State has been an integral part of the Orange County legal community for decades, opening doors for aspiring attorneys from a wide range of backgrounds and preparing graduates who go on to shape the bench and bar."

— Dean Halim Dhanidina

That mission aligns closely with his own experience across nearly three decades in the legal profession, where he has seen firsthand how the demands on new attorneys continue to evolve.

"In my career as a prosecutor, litigator, mediator, professor and judge, I have seen that success in the law increasingly depends on being practice-ready from day one. Western State's focus on practical skills and innovation positions its students to meet that need, and I am honored to help lead the college into its next chapter."

— Dean Halim Dhanidina

Dean Dhanidina's career spans the full arc of the legal profession. Following his judicial service, he worked as a litigation partner at Werksman Jackson and Quinn LLP and Umberg Zipser LLP, handling complex commercial litigation, appeals and investigations before becoming a mediator and arbitrator at Signature Resolution. Earlier, as a prosecutor with the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, he built the courtroom foundation that would shape his later work on both sides of the bench.

A graduate of Pomona College and the UCLA School of Law, he has also served as an adjunct professor at UCLA, UC Irvine, Chapman University and Western State in addition to teaching judicial education courses across California. His ability to bridge theory and practice reflects the kind of real-world insight increasingly essential to modern legal education.

Complementing his legal career, Justice Dhanidina also brings an extensive record of civic leadership in the public and private sectors, including serving as an independent director for the Fidelity National Financial Group; board memberships with the Public Law Center, Western Justice Center, Beverly Hills Bar Association, Muslim-Jewish NewGround and the Orange County School of the Arts; and advisory board positions with the Asian Pacific American Bar Association, South Asian Bar Association and Asian Americans Advancing Justice. He has most recently been named to the Board of Trustees at Pomona College.

As Dean, Dhanidina will lead Western State at a time of significant momentum and transformation. Building on 60 years of legal education and a network of more than 12,000 alumni, including over 150 graduates who have gone on to serve on the bench, he will focus on strengthening academic programs, expanding opportunities for students and advancing the college's mission to develop practice-ready attorneys prepared to lead in a complex, evolving profession.

"Justice Dhanidina's command of the legal system, as practitioner, jurist, mediator and educator, is seldomly found in a single career, let alone a single leader. He has stood at the intersection of practice, the bench and the academy, and understands from every angle what it takes to prepare the next generation of outstanding legal professionals. We are grateful to Dean Marisa Cianciarulo for her leadership over the past three years and the strong foundation she leaves behind. Western State's students, faculty and alumni gain an extraordinary leader in Justice Dhanidina, and we are honored to welcome him to the Westcliff family."

— Dr. Anthony Lee, President and CEO, Westcliff University

To learn more about Western State College of Law, visit www.wsulaw.edu.

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ABOUT WESTERN STATE COLLEGE OF LAW

Western State College of Law at Westcliff University is an established institution with a more than 50-year track record of success and a reputation for producing successful trial lawyers and more than 150 graduates who have been elevated to the bench. It offers subspecialties within the J.D. program, allowing every student to find their niche and develop a unique skill set. Western State was acquired in 2019 by Westcliff University, a private university in Irvine, Calif. offering bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees spanning 20+ areas of study. Together, the schools are fully integrated and committed to providing advanced higher education opportunities to students both nationally and globally. Visit www.wsulaw.edu or follow us on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.