Add it to his plate

Lawmaker and law student gets another big task — directing the state Democratic Party

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SPRINGFIELD — After spending a full day working at the Capitol, it isn’t uncommon for Rep. Christian Mitchell to drive to Chicago for law school classes at Loyola University Chicago, then drive back to Springfield the next morning to do it all again.

“Being a legislator is a job that demands a lot of your time and attention, and that’s not even counting the time you spend reading bills, taking conference calls, going to events. Technically it’s a part-time job, but it is pretty much full-time,” Mitchell said in an interview with the Daily Law Bulletin. “And law school is much more rigorous than any other academic experience I’ve had, so you’re combining two things, both of which demand sort of all your time — so it is pretty difficult.”

As if Mitchell wasn’t busy enough serving as a lawmaker while getting his J.D. at Loyola’s School of Law, the 31-year-old Chicago Democrat has more on his plate after being named interim executive director of the Democratic Party of Illinois.

Mitchell replaces Timothy Mapes, who was ousted from the position over sexual harassment allegations in early June. Mapes served as House Speaker Michael J. Madigan’s chief of staff since 1992 and was the party’s executive director since 1998.

An 18-person committee headed by Rep. Juliana Stratton chose Mitchell for the position. The committee, all Democratic women, was put together after Mapes announced his resignation.

Previously, Mitchell served as the Midwest director of paid media and polling for President Barack Obama’s re-election campaign in 2012. He was also a senior adviser for Tammy Duckworth’s Senate campaign, a former aide to Attorney General Lisa M. Madigan and served as the director of external affairs for the Cook County government.

He became the youngest member of the Illinois House in 2012 at the age of 25.

After being tapped for the interim position, Mitchell said his first plan of action was to launch a $1 million voter registration initiative with the Democratic candidate for governor, J.B. Pritzker.

“This $1 million initiative will help us reach voters in districts where a strong Democratic turnout from new or unregistered voters could flip seats and lead Democrats to victory up and down the ballot,” Mitchell said in a statement. “We’re going to win in November and move our communities forward.”

Mitchell said he does not plan to apply for the full-time position but will serve as the interim director until after the November election and a new director can be chosen.

And Mitchell will continue to focus on his studies. The part-time program at Loyola meets 14 weekends each year from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays and 8:30 a.m. to 1:45 p.m. on Sundays, in addition to online lectures. Mitchell takes even more classes over the summer, which overlaps with days during the end of the spring legislative session. He will graduate in December 2019.

As for his plans after law school, Mitchell said he would like to maintain his job as a lawmaker while practicing law.

“I think the experience and legal training you get being an associate at a firm or doing something where you’re using your law degree every day is really valuable,” Mitchell said. “The way the legal field teaches you to think is incredibly important and impactful.”

Even though making laws while studying law is a challenge, Mitchell said he is passionate about his work and already senses a change in his outlook on the General Assembly.

“(Going to law school) has already changed the way I think about legislation as I’m introducing bills or I’m thinking how this would affect Sixth Amendment rights, or how something would affect due process,” Mitchell said. “My goal is to get an even deeper understanding by actually practicing, and hopefully my constituents will keep electing me to make laws as well.”