

ESSAYS

THE SIX-YEAR HONEYMOON

*Peter C. Alexander**

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS year marks my sixth and last year as Dean of the Southern Illinois University (SIU) School of Law. When I announced my resignation, I wrote to the faculty that my decision to step down was a difficult one. I attended our parent university as an undergraduate, and I returned to my alma mater to give something back. As I approached my sixth year, I found that life in higher administration was taking its toll. It was time to move on. I made it clear that my decision to step down was in no way attributable to issues or people within the law school.¹

As I reflect on my tenure as dean, I think that it is fair to say that I have had a very enjoyable deanship. My colleagues and I have tackled many complex issues, and we have had a great deal of success. Together, we have raised the school's profile and strengthened our relationships with external constituencies all around the country. These successes are no accident.

* Dean and Professor of Law, Southern Illinois University School of Law. B.A. Southern Illinois University; J.D. Northeastern University School of Law. I thank my friends and colleagues for the confidence, counsel, and support I have enjoyed over the past six years. I thank my colleagues, Gene Basanta, Christopher Behan, Tom Britton and Alice Noble-Allgire and my assistant, Linda Vineyard, for their supportive and helpful comments on an earlier draft.

1. I wrote:

In closing, I want to make very clear that there is nothing taking place within the School of Law that prompts my decision to resign. I am privileged to work with very talented faculty and staff everyday. We have gained recognition for many of our important programs, and we continue to teach creatively and effectively. Moreover, many of my colleagues have produced important research, enhancing our reputation as a community of teacher-scholars within the Legal Academy. We have an incredible number of successful and supportive alumni, and our students are wonderful, hardworking lawyers-in-training. Lastly, while the faculty and staff may not have always agreed with every decision I have made, I can honestly report that I have never had one day in my job where I didn't feel fully supported by every single person in our building. This has been a great blessing and, without a doubt, it is an experience that is unique among law school deans.

Letter from Peter C. Alexander, Dean, S. Ill. Univ. Sch. of Law, to Faculty, S. Ill. Univ. Sch. of Law (Mar. 19, 2008) (on file with author).

I think there are three overriding reasons why I refer to my tenure as dean as a “honeymoon that continued for the entire six years.” First, I chose my school carefully. Second, I respect faculty governance. Third, I strive for transparency in all that I do. This essay is not intended to imply that my decisions are the only decisions that deans should make. Rather, they are insights that I have gained as I reflect on my tenure as a dean. I offer them merely as one person’s experience.

II. CHOOSE CAREFULLY

In thinking about why I believe that my deanship was successful, I am convinced that one of the key reasons is that I sent my application to the school that was the most appropriate choice for me. I am the law school dean at the university where I obtained my undergraduate degree. Like many SIU alumni, I had four great years. I had success in the classroom and I was very involved in extracurricular activities. In my last year, I had the privilege of serving as the undergraduate Student Body President. This was no doubt an exciting opportunity, and it was also a glimpse into my future.

The tradition at SIU has long been that the student leaders meet regularly with the campus CEO to discuss issues of student concern. During my year as Student Body President, I met weekly with the Interim University President,² Hiram Lesar. Dr. Lesar was a wise older man and a well-respected campus leader. He also happened to be the Dean of the School of Law. Dr. Lesar was a thoughtful person, and we discussed many topics each week. I particularly remember discussing leadership skills and methods.

When I graduated with my bachelor’s degree, I returned to the East Coast (my home area) to attend law school. I took with me very fond memories of my time at SIU and a very special feeling about my interactions with many campus faculty and administrators, especially Dr. Lesar. For years, I told friends that I hoped to return to my alma mater one day to give back to the institution that gave me my professional start.

Fast forward to 2002, when SIU began a search for a new law school dean. Several friends encouraged me to apply for the position. I did and I was selected. I believe that I was selected, in part, because I had a relationship with the University. I was not a candidate who applied for deanships at several other schools, and I did not apply because I was dying to be a dean somewhere. I had a credible reason to throw my hat into the ring at SIU. I attended college there, and I wanted to give something back to an institution that I loved very much.

When friends ask me if they should apply for a deanship at a particular school, I always ask them why they are interested in that school. If they do not have a clear reason, I suggest to them that the place might not be the best fit. Although I was obviously not privy to the discussions of the search committee and faculty, I am fairly certain that my colleagues felt some measure of comfort

2. See Southern Illinois University: Organizational Structure of SIU System, <http://www.siu.edu/pres/structure.html> (last visited Jan. 16, 2009). Currently, the campus CEO at SIU is referred to as “Chancellor” and the SIU System head is the “President.” *Id.*

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during my interview. I knew my way around campus. I had several former mentors who were still employed at SIU. I knew what a “saluki” was!³

I think my relationship with the University allowed me to begin my deanship with a level of familiarity that removed some of the newness that comes with changing jobs and establishing oneself at a new institution. My general comfort with the University administration was a great help as I met with campus leaders and discussed the law school’s plans and goals. While not every candidate will be going back to an alma mater, candidates should have some genuine connection with or attraction to the law school to which they are applying for a deanship. The affinity could be based on mission, prior work with the faculty, or some other shared experience or value. In the end, a dean candidate should take the time to determine if a particular school is a good fit.

III. LET THE FACULTY GOVERN

From the time I entered the legal academy to the present day, I have considered myself a faculty member first. As dean, I realized that I had a new job, but the job, in my mind, was as a faculty member with additional duties. I was neither a department head in private industry nor the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. At best, I have been first among equals. To our students, I frequently refer to myself as the “head cheerleader in charge.”

I have always viewed my role as helping the faculty achieve its goals for the law school. My job is to remove obstacles that get in the way of success and make available resources that could help us do the things that we want to do to move the law school forward. I do not dictate our future.

Currently, the law school is engaged in a self-study process to prepare for our upcoming ABA sabbatical site inspection. We have been in “self-study mode” for more than two years, enjoying wonderfully rich and enriching conversations about the future of the school. We have discussed many objectives, and we have questioned why some of our long-held practices still stand. More importantly, we have held all of our conversations in an atmosphere that is open and non-judgmental. I am proud to say that we have really not had difficulty dealing with our sometimes-complex issues.

Pursuant to our rules, the dean appoints faculty to committees and the faculty ratifies the dean’s appointments at the last faculty meeting of the year. I have engaged in the practice of giving each committee chair a charge at the start of each academic year. I have otherwise resisted any internal desire I might have to move the school in a particular direction. It is not *my* law school; it is *our* law school.

When I have an opinion to share on a topic that is best left to the faculty, I try to distinguish between speaking as a member of the faculty and as “the

3. A “saluki” is the SIU Carbondale mascot. Southern Illinois University Carbondale, What Is a Saluki?, <http://www.siu.edu/aboutsiuc/saluki.html> (last visited Jan. 16, 2009). A saluki is a tall, slender, and swift hunting dog. WEBSTER’S NEW UNIVERSAL UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY 1601 (2d ed. 1983). Not only did the search team realize that I was aware of the school’s mascot, they also commented that I wore maroon and white, our school’s colors, to my interview.

administrator.” I also try to limit those times when I speak as a faculty member because I realize that when I speak, I am never just a “faculty member.” The dean’s words sometimes carry extra weight, even when the extra weight is not intended. Accordingly, a dean must be sensitive to how a faculty member might interpret his statement and use discretion when deciding to enter into a conversation. Do I have opinions? Of course I do, but I am fairly confident that other members of our faculty will raise the same point or might even have better points to make. Their history with the institution or stature within the faculty will help to underscore the importance of the message.

I am very comfortable in the role of “first among equals.” I do not have to be “the boss.” As a result, I think my colleagues are truly colleagues. I have not noticed everyone becoming awkwardly silent when I enter the faculty lounge to eat lunch or arrive for a committee meeting. I do not think people regard me as the person who is going to tell them what to do and how to do it. I have tried to promote healthy discussions and have taken great care to make sure that my involvement in those discussions is appropriate for a dean who regards himself as a faculty member first.

I reinforce my belief that the faculty should govern and that I am a faculty member first by performing the same responsibilities as my colleagues. I take my turn on committees. I have served on the Admissions, Professional Development, and Technology Committees, not as an *ex officio* member, but as a participating member who shares in the heavy lifting that every committee member performs. I teach one course each semester.⁴ I engage in productive scholarship and try to lead the faculty by example, publishing on a regular basis throughout my deanship.⁵

I have long believed if a dean candidate told a search committee what he or she would change about the school, the committee should pass on that candidate. I sincerely think that it is not a dean’s job to change a law school. A dean’s job, in my opinion, should be to guide the faculty as it sets the direction of the school and to participate in the direction-setting “as a faculty member” when appropriate. In my mind, deans who go to law schools with the intention to change the mission, purpose, or direction of the school do not honor faculty governance. Those big-picture issues need and deserve conversation and study as well as input from everyone who might be affected by the changes.

4. In 2006, I was honored to be named the School of Law’s Outstanding Teacher. *See Congratulations to Outstanding Employees*, LETTER OF L. (S. Ill. U. Sch. L., Carbondale, Ill.), Jan. 23, 2006, at 1, available at <http://www.law.siu.edu/event/Pastlol/Newsletter%20118.pdf>.

5 *See, e.g.*, PETER C. ALEXANDER & GARY S. GILDIN, MILLER CTR. FOR PUB. INTEREST ADVOCACY, DIRECTORY OF PRO BONO BANKRUPTCY PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES (2007), available at <http://www.dsl.psu.edu/centers/miller/probono/probono.pdf>; Peter C. Alexander, *Another Perspective: The Bankruptcy Code Harms Women and Children*, 15 WIDENER L.J. 599 (2006); Peter C. Alexander, *Confessions of a Hybrid Dean: Dean as Sustainer*, 36 U. TOL. L. REV. 1 (2004); Peter C. Alexander, *From Brown to Topeka to the Future*, 96 LAW LIBR. J. 219 (2004); Peter C. Alexander & Gary S. Gildin, *Bankruptcy Pro Bono Legal Assistance Programs: An Update*, 16 NORTON J. BANKR. L. & PRAC. 397 (2007); Peter C. Alexander & Kevin A. Hayes, *Non-Uniform Bankruptcy Laws after BAPCPA*, 31 S. ILL. U. L.J. 549 (2007).

IV. PROVIDE A TRANSPARENT VISION

When I was a candidate for dean, I told the SIU faculty, staff, and students that I had no desire to “change the good things they were doing.” Instead, I offered to make sure that constituencies outside of the School of Law knew about our good work. I also wanted to use my office to make it possible for the law school to achieve its goals. As dean, I have not wavered from that offer. I have tried to use release time, variations in committee loads, and other tools at my disposal to give faculty and staff time to work on projects that help move the law school forward. As a result, nearly everyone is engaged in the process of marketing the school, and we have earned several honors and special mentions for our good work.⁶

Matters such as faculty salary increases, faculty discipline, and occasional disagreements with the central administration are also handled in an open, transparent manner. To the extent that I am permitted, I try to keep the lines of communication open with the faculty and the staff. I work very hard to share information with everyone and not with a “kitchen cabinet” or some other subset of our community. Of course, when matters are confidential or quasi-confidential, I limit the information flow as required.

Transparency also applies to our students. It has been a hallmark of my deanship to include students in the life of the law school as much as possible. We admit bright men and women into our program, and it would be a shame not to involve them in setting policy and determining the future of our college. As a result, students serve on virtually every faculty committee, the Student Bar Association (SBA) President attends all faculty meetings, and I regularly meet with students to keep the information flowing smoothly. I hold small-group meetings with students in my office, speak at SBA-sponsored town-hall meetings, and serve as the faculty advisor to the SBA. Dr. Lesar’s leadership lessons have stayed with me, and they obviously play an important part in how I lead our community. I remember the many meetings I was privileged to attend in his office when I was a student, and I think that we engage our students in a manner that would make him proud.

In the end, my experience has been that most everyone knows how we operate and what our limitations are. Because of the information sharing that takes place, we are enjoying great success. The only things that limit us are our imagination and desire.

6. In 2004, the SIU School of Law was a co-winner of the ABA’s E. Smythe Gambrell Professionalism Award. American Bar Association: Center for Professional Responsibility: Gambrell Professionalism Award Winners, <http://www.abanet.org/cpr/awards/prevwinners.html#36> (last visited Jan. 16, 2009). In 2006, we were recognized by the Illinois Judges Association for our program of legal education and received \$5000 to award to one of our students. In 2008, our marketing and recruitment DVD won an Award of Excellence from the Association of Marketing and Communication Professionals Videographer Awards. Pete Rosenbery, *Law School Recruitment DVD Wins Award*, SALUKI TIMES (Carbondale, Ill.), June 23, 2008, at A1.

V. CONCLUSION

I certainly do not have the perfect prescription for deaning, but I have had a great run as dean of the Southern Illinois University School of Law. If my experiences and reflections can help someone else have a positive experience, I am happy to share them. I have been fortunate to watch our law school move forward and flourish.

The credit for our success is not mine; it is a shared accomplishment. All of the men and women with whom I work help to make us better, and I am grateful to call them colleagues and friends. We have worked hard together, and, while there is much more work to do, my successor will be a very lucky person.