

LESSONS LEARNED ON THE JOURNEY FROM ASSOCIATE DEAN OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS TO DEAN

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ALTHOUGH I didn't realize it at the time, my journey to becoming a dean began on July 1, 2008, the day I became Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock ("UALR") William H. Bowen Law School. On December 31, 2014, my tenure as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs came to an end. I began to write down everything that I learned during my six and a half years in that position in an effort to figure out the next steps in my career path.¹ I realized that my thoughts and experiences might be helpful to others as they decide whether to pursue an associate dean position or how they will approach the position going forward. On January 4, 2016, I became the third permanent Dean of the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University College of Law. I have included a few thoughts on how being an associate dean prepared me for my new role as dean.

I. FIRST THINGS FIRST: INVESTIGATION

Before you decide whether being an associate dean is the next step for you, find out what the position entails at your institution. Make sure there are things in the position that you actually want to do. Administration involves paperwork, meetings, and leading others. If you don't like these things, becoming an administrator may not be the thing for you. Your investigation should include talking with other faculty at your institution who have served in the position you are seeking. They are valuable resources.

I served as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. Therefore, this Essay will focus on my experiences and the lessons I learned in that position. I found myself initially responsible for an assortment of administrative matters, academic matters, faculty development, and student affairs, as well as whatever walked in the door. My major responsibilities included preparing the academic schedule, coordinating registration,² supervising adjunct faculty, and supervising those involved in these matters.²

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1. I will discuss experiences that I had as well as my thoughts on the associate dean position. I was fortunate to serve with three outstanding deans and to work with an awesome faculty. Each had his or her unique style. If your time overlaps different administrations, you must be able to change.

2. In time, the Dean decided to create another associate dean position to address faculty development. The position was titled Associate Dean for Faculty Research and Development.

You should also consider the leadership style of the dean. Is the dean someone that you will enjoy working with? Will that person “have your back”? You are likely to spend lots of hours together sorting through difficult problems. A good working relationship is critical. It will be important, as you approach your duties, to know that, when the “rubber meets the road,” the dean will support you in the execution of your duties. The other side to this coin is that you must be comfortable talking candidly with the dean and accepting guidance. You will be the dean’s representative in whatever you do. Letting her know in advance that you are about to take an action that might cause ripples is crucial. She will let you know whether she supports your decision, or she might give appropriate guidance to help you reach another decision. In addition, the Dean might forbid some courses of action.

Finally, consider your personal strengths and weaknesses. Are you sensitive or tough-skinned? You are likely to have supervisory authority over some combination of faculty, staff, and students. Things can be said to you or about you that may be hurtful. You have to be one who can take the positive from those things, let them go, and move on. Holding on to negative comments or experiences will not help you get the job done!

II. TO PURSUE OR NOT TO PURSUE: THAT IS THE QUESTION

Should you pursue the position or accept it if offered? To answer this question, I suggest you consider where you are in your personal and professional life. You should also consider your ultimate goal.

A. *Tenure and Promotion*

Are you a tenured and full professor? Every institution has standards to obtain promotion and tenure. It takes time to reach the levels of teaching, service, and scholarship that are required by these standards. Producing the scholarship necessary for promotion and tenure can be especially time consuming. As an associate dean, there will be many demands on your time. You may not have time to fulfill decanal responsibilities and pursue tenure or promotion. In addition, depending on what your institution requires, an application for tenure or promotion can be voluminous. Simply putting the application together can be quite time consuming.

It is likely to be easier to fulfill your responsibilities as an associate dean if you are a tenured, full professor. Many of your colleagues will be tenured full professors. If you are junior to them, it might be challenging to deal effectively with the responsibilities of the position. On occasion, you will have to talk with

Associate Dean positions at other institutions include Associate Dean for Experiential Learning and Associate Dean for Student Affairs. The former is focused on clinical programs and other experiential learning activities. The latter focuses on a variety of things including the Academic Success Program and Bar Prep Program. I have proposed to create a new associate dean position at my current law school. The Associate Dean for Student Learning and Assessment would address two very important areas—student learning and assessment.

Winter 2017]

LESSONS LEARNED

243

a colleague about situations that occur in the classroom or other issues involving their role as faculty members. You will also have to assign classes and prepare the course schedule. All of this will be easier if you are a peer rather than a junior colleague.

Finally, remember that tenure and promotion require a recommendation from the tenured faculty. Although you hope that they would be able to put personal disagreements behind, recognizing that you are only trying to do your job, your hope may not be reality. There is no reason to take an unnecessary risk.

My opinion is that it is best to have these matters resolved before you take the position.³

B. Teaching, Scholarship, and Service

To be successful in the academy, you must succeed in teaching, scholarship, and service. Are you to the point in your career that you feel comfortable reducing the time that you spend focused on teaching and scholarship in order to increase the time focused on service within the law school?

Teaching, service, and scholarship are continuous responsibilities for law faculty. Teaching is the most important thing professors do for our students. It is important that your skill as a teacher be developed to a point that you are satisfied with and can maintain that skill throughout your time as associate dean. Due to time constraints, it may be difficult to focus a lot of effort on improving as a teacher. In addition, taking on a new course that interests you might not be possible for the same reason. You should consider the impact that your new administrative responsibilities will have on your teaching goals.⁴

Have you accomplished much of what you want to accomplish as a scholar? I came to the position having written three articles. I was developing my identity as a scholar. It is better to know exactly who you are as a scholar and to have a record as a scholar before you become associate dean for academic affairs. Your job will either directly or indirectly involve mentoring other faculty in this area. I was initially responsible for reviewing scholarship and evaluating faculty applications for summer research grants. This was mostly procedural, but part of it was substantive review. I would have been better equipped to handle the process had I been more developed as a scholar.

Will you be able to survive professionally with reduced time for research and writing? Scholarship, research, and writing is as critical to some as food and water. Developing effective time management or negotiating time off for writing can help secure sufficient time for writing. The bottom line is you will have less time than you are used to having to pursue interesting ideas. If that is a problem for you, you may not be ready to step into administration.

3. I was a tenured Associate Professor when I was appointed Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. The scholarship requirement for promotion to full professor at Bowen was 3 articles. I had completed the articles before I accepted the position, so I only had to prepare the application. I did so my first year as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. It was approved.

4. If possible, negotiate to not teach while in the position or for perhaps your first year.

Are you ready to reduce non-law school service? To some professors, maintaining a high level of service outside of the law school is critical. As dean, your service within the law school will increase dramatically. There will be a variety of committees you will be on by virtue of being associate dean for academic affairs.⁵ There will also be a various law school functions that you will be expected to attend. Add to that teaching and dealing with your day-to-day responsibilities inside the law school, and you may not have time or energy to pursue the same level of service outside the law school.

Have you developed your career in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service to the point that it is not only sufficient for tenure and promotion, but it is also personally acceptable to you? If not, you may not be ready to step into an administrative position.

C. Consider the End at the Beginning

It is important to know why you are seeking the position and to consider your career path before you accept an associate dean for academic affairs position. How does it fit with your vision for your career?

Considering where you expect to end your career in academia before you start the journey to become an associate dean is important. Your purpose in taking the position governs where your focus should be. If your goal is to be dean or move up the administrative ladder in some way, you need to seek certain experiences. If your goal is to serve the school and return to the faculty older and wiser, you won't need the same experiences. Beware! Your interests may change, so it is better to have a variety of experiences.

If your goal is to ultimately become a dean, you should not only excel at the expected responsibilities, you should also seek additional leadership responsibilities. Fundraising and budgeting experience are important. Service on university-wide committees, leadership on major curriculum revision projects, and chairing the self-study committee in preparation for the ABA site visit, are also important roles. You should seek any role that demonstrates your ability to lead faculty in a collaborative way. Taking on additional responsibilities will be a challenge because there are so many day-to-day tasks that you must accomplish. This, in addition to your already established track record as a teacher and scholar, should make you an attractive candidate for dean.⁶

Someone hoping to be dean of a law school must have a record of service to the law school community. A law school dean needs more than a desire to serve; she must have actual service experience. There is room in the ranks of associate deans for those who seek to contribute to their law school and then return to full-time teaching. I speculate that many associate deans fall into this category. My

5. I was on the Faculty Development Committee, Curriculum Committee, Faculty Appointments Committee, and the Academic Conduct Committee. I was responsible for the law school academic calendar, so I also served on the university calendar committee.

6. I say this as a veteran of two dean search committees. Candidates who rose to the top had exceptional records of teaching, scholarship, and service. They also demonstrated leadership in a variety of collateral matters inside and outside of their law schools.

Winter 2017]

LESSONS LEARNED

245

only suggestion is that you not limit the opportunities and experiences that you seek in the role of associate dean. You just might change your mind! Some experiences, such as being involved in fund raising and assisting with the law school budget, will make you a more attractive dean candidate.

If you are certain that you do not want to pursue being a dean, you should limit your time in the associate dean position. There are likely other things you would like to do, and there are others waiting to step up to the plate. Some schools limit terms to a certain number of years and/or rotate the responsibility among faculty members. Others have no time limitation. Impose your own limitation based on your personal goals.

III. KEYS TO SUCCESS

Being associate dean for academic affairs is like other major experiences in life. You can't tell someone about it—they must experience it to understand. For instance, others told me what being a parent was like, but until I actually became a parent, I couldn't fully understand. What follows is a list of suggested strategies based on things I learned as associate dean for academic affairs.

A. *It's Not About You*

The law school is really about effectively educating students to go out into the world and provide quality legal services. People need legal help, and students need a fulfilling career. What happens in the law school is critical to this end. As associate dean, you will be called upon to make decisions that directly impact the students and faculty. Remember, it's not about you having your way or things being done the way you think they should be done. It's about what's best for the students. Whenever I found myself focusing on having my way, I knew I was going in the wrong direction.

B. *Don't Act Ugly*

I mentioned above that you should ask yourself whether you have a thick skin. People will lose their temper with you. They might also intentionally or unintentionally say or do hurtful things. You don't get to respond in kind. Responding in kind will not accomplish the mission and is likely to make things worse. "A gentle answer turns away wrath. But a harsh word stirs up anger."⁷ Occasionally, you can even learn something from an angry person.

C. *Remember Who You Are*

You would not be considering the position if you were not already an accomplished professor. You have already demonstrated that you can succeed in problem solving. Put simply, the job of an associate dean for academic affairs is

7. *Proverbs* 15:1 (New King James Version).

to communicate and solve problems. You have the resources and ability to accomplish the mission.

D. Listen

I teach Legal Interviewing and Counseling. The first step in conducting the substantive part of the interview is to ask an open-ended question that encourages the client to speak freely. The next step is to actively listen to what the client says.⁸ We talk a lot about active listening in that class, and the students practice that skill. It is important to listen carefully, don't interrupt, and don't change the subject. My time as associate dean for academic affairs gave me abundant practice in this skill as well. It's not just important when dealing with clients. It's important when dealing with anyone with whom you want to have a continuing positive relationship.

E. Be Flexible and Calm

I have a t-shirt from my days in the United States Marine Corps that says "Semper Gumbi," meaning, "always flexible."⁹ Things change, and the best plans don't go quite as planned. When something unexpected happens, or when someone makes a mistake, I normally ask, "Did anybody die"? This question makes the point that we can fix or accommodate just about anything. Your most important responsibility is to communicate effectively and solve problems. A calm mind and confident demeanor are essential to accomplish this goal. The first step to solving any problem is to remain calm.

Another dimension to flexibility is to be ready for things to change—sometimes suddenly. The first semester that I was associate dean a snow storm moved in to the area the day final exams were scheduled to begin. The dean was away on business so it was left to me to calmly make the decisions necessary to close the school and reschedule the exams. On occasion, there was a need to make a last minute change in the course schedule. I had to calmly figure out how to cover a class, or in the alternative, whether to cancel the class.

F. Embrace Interruptions

When I first became associate dean for academic affairs, I approached each day with a list of things I wanted to accomplish. Most days, something unexpected requiring immediate attention would arise. I had no choice but to surrender my "to do" list and deal with the unanticipated issue. I would end the day feeling frustrated that the "to do" list did not get done. It took me several

8. I teach the collaborative method of interviewing and counseling. ROBERT F. COCHRAN ET AL., *THE COUNSELOR-AT-LAW: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO CLINE INTERVIEWING AND COUNSELING* 70-71 (3d ed. 2014).

9. This is a play on the U.S. Marine Corps motto *Semper Fidelis*, which means, "always faithful."

Winter 2017]

LESSONS LEARNED

247

months to figure out that the interruptions were actually the job. Dealing with unexpected issues from faculty, students, and staff goes with the territory.

G. Don't Do Things to Make Students Unnecessarily Unhappy

You will be called on to solve a variety of problems affecting students. Enforcement of academic policies is sometimes not popular with students—especially to those who don't get what they want. Occasionally, you can come up with a creative way to comply with the applicable policy and do what a student requests. If so, do it! It is not productive to make students unnecessarily unhappy. Here are a few simple rules for dealing with students:

1. Be available. Problems can arise suddenly, and it helps students to have easy access to you. Email makes access easier, but some things must be handled face-to-face.
2. Be reasonable. To the extent possible, explain decisions to students. They may not end up agreeing with your position, but at least they will understand the reasons behind it.
3. Be nice. Sometimes it is not what you say, but how you say it.
4. Be open to ideas from students. Students have a unique perspective on what happens at the law school.

H. Use Available Resources

There are resources available inside and outside of your school. The most valuable resources inside your school are previous associate deans for academic affairs. They can be valuable sounding boards for issues that arise. The American Bar Association (“ABA”) has an email list for all assistant and associate deans. You may encounter an issue that you believe is the first of its kind. An email to the list will reveal others who have experienced a similar situation and who will provide advice.

Don't pass up any opportunity to mingle with other associate deans. The ABA sponsors a meeting for assistant and associate deans. There is normally a breakfast meeting for associate deans at the Annual Association of American Law Schools meeting.

I. Take Care of Yourself

You must be spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically healthy to accomplish any task. An associate dean is a demanding position, so your health in all of these dimensions is vital.

1. Spirituality has many facets. Stick with your spiritual disciplines! Meditation and reflection are important. Just as we encourage students to develop a professional identity, we must do the same.¹⁰

10. I am a Christian. I have normally been very involved in a church, so it was important for me to maintain that involvement. For me, Christianity involves certain spiritual disciplines. Those

2. Maintain strong relationships outside of the law school. It is important to have supportive people around you who care about your wellbeing. These are people you can be totally honest with about things going on at work and who can be trusted to maintain confidences.
3. Recognize unconstructive thought patterns when they occur, and let them go. You cannot accomplish the mission while holding a grudge.
4. Exercise, eat right, and rest. All three are essential to good health. Achievement-motivated and service-oriented people want to keep going until the task is done. There is always another task to do, so time to rest will never come unless it is part of your routine.
5. Take a vacation. Plan to leave the area and disconnect from the school at least two weeks each year.
6. Know when to say “no.” You can’t be involved in every new project. It can be hard to say no because service-oriented people always want to help. Sometimes, for the sake of being effective in the many roles you must play, you have to decline a new opportunity.

IV. RECOGNIZE WHEN IT’S TIME TO MOVE ON

Knowing when it’s time to step down is part of thinking about the end from the beginning. Once you have accomplished what you intended to accomplish, your preset time has expired, and you should move on. It has been said that unless asked to step down, an associate dean for academic affairs should not leave the position during a decanal transition or just before a site inspection. Dean transitions can be a time of uncertainty for a school. The ship must keep sailing as the one dean moves out and another assumes leadership.

The associate dean for academic affairs position is important in site inspections. Often, this person helps with the self-study and the site evaluation questionnaire, and helps to set up the inspection team’s visit. The associate dean for academic affairs can provide stability to help make the transition smooth. Although such considerations are important, more important is your personal decision, made at the beginning of your tenure, about when it is time to leave.

V. THE NEXT CHAPTER

Upon completing my time as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, I briefly returned to full-time teaching. I enjoyed administration, so becoming a dean was the next natural step. Serving as dean uses academic leadership skills I learned and used as associate dean. In my opinion, the most important of these skills is effective communication. I admit that I am still a work in progress!

Communication skills, primarily active listening, are critical. I have learned to listen to others without interrupting. Listening—really listening—makes people feel that their thoughts are important even if you don’t accept their counsel. For me, it is particularly important because I came into a totally new environment.

are prayer, Bible reading, attending weekly service, and some level of service to the church. Whatever your spiritual disciplines are, it is important that you maintain them.

Not only did I move to a new law school with a unique identity, I became Dean of one of the six Historically Black College or University (“HBCU”) law schools in the country.¹¹ Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University (“FAMU”) College of Law, like the university it is a part of, has a rich history.¹² Listening to people—faculty, staff, students, and community members—is an important part of learning about my school and leading in my new environment.

Intimate knowledge that I acquired as associate dean of how another law school works is very helpful. Although it is not my mission at FAMU to recreate the UALR Bowen Law School in Florida, familiarity with how a law school works—such as how classes are scheduled, how field placement programs should work, and how to engage part-time students—have all come in handy.

The major adjustment has been embracing that “the buck stops here.” When a final decision must be made within the law school, I am the one who must make it and live with the consequences. No longer am I a trusted advisor who gets to give advice, accept a decision, and implement it. I am now the one who figures out how to use advice from others. I have also adjusted to losing my first name within the law school community. As a matter of respect initiated by others, I am “Dean Epps” to most. After six months on the job, I have become accustomed to being photographed and to giving impromptu welcomes and talks of various kinds. The key to these brief addresses is something I learned as associate dean, always talk about the mission and core values of the school.¹³

11. There are six ABA-approved HBCU law schools: Howard University School of Law, Southern University Law Center, North Carolina Central University School of Law, Thurgood Marshall School of Law of Texas Southern University, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College of Law, and the University of the District of Columbia David Clarke School of Law.

12. The FAMU College of Law was originally established on the FAMU Tallahassee campus in 1949 to provide legal education in Florida to African Americans who desired to attend law school. Jim Crow segregation prevented African Americans from being admitted to the University of Florida. Virgil Hawkins, an African American, applied to the University of Florida Law School. He was rejected because of his skin color, but he was later admitted to the newly created FAMU College of Law. Although Mr. Hawkins never attended FAMU College of Law, he is the reason it was created. In 1968, the state closed FAMU College of Law and created a law school at Florida State University, also in Tallahassee. In 2002, the Florida legislature corrected this injustice by reopening the FAMU College of Law in Orlando, Florida. I am honored to serve as the third permanent Dean of the reestablished FAMU College of Law. *History of FAMU College of Law*, FLORIDA A&M UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LAW, <http://law.famu.edu/col-history/> (last visited Dec. 27, 2016).

13. The Mission Statement and Core Values of the FAMU College of Law appear in every classroom and administrative office in the building. The Mission Statement is: “The reestablished Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University College of Law reaffirms our historical legacy of excellence and responsibility to serve as a transformative force for the public good. Our mission is to serve as a beacon of hope and catalyst for change by providing access to excellent educational training and opportunities to generations of students seeking to serve the needs of traditionally underserved people and communities locally, nationally and internationally. While we continue our historic mission of educating African-Americans, we embrace persons of all racial, ethnic and national groups as members of the university community. We are dedicated to developing legal professionals and community leaders committed to equitable justice and the rule of law.” The Core Values are: Distinction in teaching, scholarship and service; Excellence with caring; Experiential learning; Professionalism; and Diversity. *Mission—Historical Legacy of Excellence*, FLORIDA

Everything that I discussed above in Part III: Keys to Success, applies to my role as Dean. One additional thing I have learned is that it is important to spend time each week with students and alums. Seeing them succeed inspires me to make FAMU College of Law excellent in every way. Those who come through our doors deserve nothing less. It's not about me—it's about them.

Here are a few specifics I learned as associate dean and use as Dean of the FAMU College of Law:

1. Embrace the mission and core values of your school. I learned at Bowen that any impromptu introduction, welcome, or comments can be readily composed around the school's mission and core values. By using the school's mission and core values in this way, you add value to your school, and folks will begin to remember what your school is about.
2. Read the rules and apply them consistently. This applies to academic policies, personnel rules, and any other law school policy. Being consistent in application is important when dealing with everyone. If a benefit is extended to one, others have the right to expect the same benefit. If a rule is waived in one situation, it will need to be waived in others. It is good to think through the broad consequences of following different policies in similar situations.
3. Roam the building occasionally. It's good to get out of the office and see what's happening in other areas of the building. Often, walking around leads to informal interactions with students, faculty, and staff. I love it!
4. Procrastination never helps! I learned that I have a tendency to procrastinate when I have a difficult task to accomplish. This does not help and can make things worse. Delivering unpleasant news does not become easier with time. Take care of things as they arise, so that you will be ready for the next challenge.
5. Meet with faculty and staff in their offices. I am still in the process of meeting individually with every faculty member. If I ask to meet with someone, I normally go to that person's office. This shows respect and sends less of an authoritarian message. Of course, at times it is necessary to send such a message. Discernment is needed to figure out when that is appropriate.
6. Choose your seat carefully. Always sitting at the head of the table or behind a desk when meeting with others conveys authoritarianism. That may not be a good message to send to those with whom you are meeting. To convey a collaborative spirit, I seldom sit at the head of the table, and I normally rotate seats in staff meetings. The group knows that I am the Dean and am ultimately responsible for final decisions. In my office, I sit at a small round table or in a chair in front of my desk near the person I am meeting.
7. Always wear something that represents your school. Our Communications Director at Bowen always encouraged me to wear the

Winter 2017]

LESSONS LEARNED

251

school colors when appearing somewhere on behalf of the school. Now, almost everywhere I go, I am a representative of the FAMU College of Law. I try to wear something, school colors, lapel pin, or a symbol, that reminds me and others of the school I represent. Sometimes, this generates questions and an opportunity to talk about my school. I find that it also demonstrates enthusiasm for my position and pride in FAMU College of Law. This is an important message to my students.

VI. CONCLUSION

I accepted the position as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the UALR William H. Bowen Law School because I wanted to serve the law school community. Service to others has always been an important value to me. As I look back on my time in that position, I can honestly say that I served, I learned, and I had a positive impact on the law school community. I couldn't ask for more. I accepted the position as Dean of the FAMU College of Law for similar reasons. Additionally, I was irresistibly drawn to the special mission of the school. I have much to learn about my new position. I believe that service as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at Bowen, as well as my previous leadership experiences,¹⁴ equipped me for success in my new role.

14. I served as a Judge Advocate in the USMC, attaining the rank of Major and as Managing Attorney of the Albany Office of Georgia Legal Services Program.