

# TOP TEN REASONS TO BE A LAW SCHOOL DEAN

*R. Lawrence Dessem*

**S**ERVING as a law school dean can be tough duty. Many people, particularly law school faculty members, have asked over the years why anyone would ever take such a position. This question is particularly relevant because the likely alternative for most deans is service as a full-time professor on a law school faculty—which is, without a doubt, one of the world’s truly great jobs.

There are many times during every dean’s tenure when he asks himself why he has chosen to serve as dean. Faculty politics, university relations, demanding consumer-oriented students, *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, and innumerable other challenges have led to short decanal tenures and harried deans. This dean, too, has asked himself on more than one occasion why he has, freely and voluntarily, chosen to serve as a law school dean. The invitation to write for this symposium has given me the opportunity to reflect upon this question. What follows, therefore, is my answer to the question “Why serve as a law school dean?”

Those aspiring to a law school deanship, and other curiosity seekers, should understand that this is written at the completion of the sixth year of my deanship. It is written after a very successful year for our law school. It is written in May, after commencement, and without the prospect of any end-of-semester examinations or papers to grade. If you asked me or any other dean this same question at a different time of the year or point in his or her decanal career, this list might be significantly shorter, less upbeat, and darker in tone.

Consistent with the informal style of this symposium, I present my answers to the “Why be a dean?” question in the “Top Ten List” format popularized by David Letterman. In organizing this list, the reasons move from the internal, law school-focused, reasons to broader reasons stemming from the dean’s activities and influence outside the immediate law school and university communities. While the observations are general in nature, they are in large measure based upon my own experience in my own deanship.

## 1 *Service as Dean Provides an Ever-changing Variety of Challenges, Joys, Surprises, and People*

Law school deaning is a great position for faculty members and others with a short attention span. “Never a dull moment” could be the slogan for most deans on most days. This is, in fact, one of the reasons that I enjoyed being a litigator—that position, too, brought me a never-ending stream of new challenges, opportunities, people, and life situations. Each fall brings new students, new faculty, and new opportunities and challenges to the law school dean.

---

\* Dean and Professor of Law, Mercer University. J.D., Harvard Law School, B.A., Macalester College.

## 2. *Service as Dean Provides the Opportunity to Work on Constructive Changes to the Status Quo*

As a life philosophy, it's much more constructive to actually work to make and implement change than to simply whine about the status quo. While all deans are frustrated at times by the circumscribed nature of their authority within collegial law school governance systems and university lines of authority, deans actually can accomplish things and, with the support of the law school faculty and university administration, effectuate real change.

This is especially true if the dean takes a longer-run view of the evolution of a law school and university, rather than focusing upon the outcome of a particular faculty meeting or the accomplishments of an individual academic year. Deans also must realize that the change achieved often will not be in precisely the manner that the dean, herself, ideally would have specified. The truly tough challenges can be approached from many different ways and resolved by many different approaches. Deans must realize that, in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, we typically are searching for "proximate solutions to insoluble problems," rather than for perfect solutions to particularly tough problems. Deans also must realize that, in the words of Lawrence O'Brien, there are "No Final Victories" to life's truly perplexing problems.

## 3 *Service as Dean Provides Opportunities to Help Students and Staff*

While on some days it appears that all problems facing the law school dean are "insoluble," there are many day-to-day problems faced by students and staff that a dean, all by himself, can solve. Deans may be able to approve or suggest accommodations for individuals with medical conditions that preclude a standard law school schedule. Deans can write recommendations, contact employers, or otherwise help students obtain employment. Deans can help resolve potential embarrassments or even potential disciplinary issues for students and staff in a confidential manner that preserves the dignity of the individuals involved. While these may be satisfying "little" victories for a dean, they can be truly significant for the students and staff facing such difficulties. Small kindnesses usually are remembered much longer and more vividly by the individual who was helped than by the dean himself.

## 4. *Service as Dean Provides Wonderful Opportunities to Mentor Younger Faculty*

The help that deans can provide to faculty can be even more significant than that provided to students and staff. Sometimes this service is rendered to quite senior faculty, particularly if a faculty member is facing health or other personal difficulties. However, many more opportunities present themselves with respect to younger faculty who have not yet established themselves within legal education and the law school.

Junior faculty members typically need mentoring concerning their teaching, scholarship, and service, and they generally welcome the opportunity to discuss such

matters with the dean. By teaching assignments, research and conference support, committee assignments, and general advice and encouragement, the dean is uniquely situated to help and develop junior faculty. Counseling concerning tenure and promotion, scholarly agendas, and expectations for law school professors can contribute significantly to the professional development of younger faculty colleagues.

Deans receive great satisfaction from the accomplishments of faculty members whom they have encouraged and helped in other, more concrete ways. This is particularly true with respect to non-tenured and other junior faculty members. In many law schools, it is the dean who is instrumental in inculcating in younger faculty the traditions and ethos of that law school and of legal education.

5. *Service as Dean Provides Opportunities to Work Together with Other Senior Law School Leaders*

The modern law school dean does not lead alone, but with and through a cadre of other senior administrative leaders. Deans for academic affairs, student services, admissions, and career services are among the senior leaders found at virtually all law schools today. Working with these senior leaders is one of the true joys of service as a law school dean.

These senior administrative positions provide attractive opportunities to serve, and, consequently, they attract outstanding individuals. Despite their separate tasks and responsibilities, these senior leaders must work closely together and across departmental lines of responsibility in order to further the law school's mission. This means that the dean, herself, will typically have close contact with these senior law school leaders. Working together with such a talented group of individuals to solve common problems and move the school forward is one of the true joys of law school deaning today.

6. *Service as Dean Provides Excellent Leadership Opportunities Within the University Community*

All deans within a university are looked upon to provide leadership not only for their individual schools and colleges, but also within the university more generally. Law school deans, in particular, often are called upon to serve their university outside the bounds of their particular law school.

As lawyers, law school deans are uniquely situated to provide advice, counsel, and leadership on the many legal and non-legal issues facing today's universities. Questions concerning intellectual property, academic freedom and due process, sexual harassment, and affirmative action all may lead to requests for the law school dean to serve, and lead, university committees. Law school deans also often are tapped to serve and lead university search committees for other deans, senior administrators, and university provosts and presidents. More generally, university-wide deans' meetings not infrequently involve direct questions to the law school dean concerning the dean's views or opinions about legal and other issues facing the university.

It sometimes is taxing for law school deans to render such university service in addition to their many other responsibilities. However, these can be unique opportunities to advance the law school while providing invaluable service to the university of which the law school is one part. When the call from the provost or president comes to serve in this fashion, the dean graciously should accept.

#### 7 *Service as Dean Involves the Dean in Wonderful Interchanges with Interesting Alumni*

As a law school dean you meet some truly interesting people. Very often, these individuals are your law school's own alumni. New deans very quickly come to realize that, as dean, their alumni interactions are not with a randomly selected group of law school graduates. Instead, the alumni with whom a dean typically interacts are judges and attorneys who truly love the law school, want to support it, and are invested in the dean's success. As any dean will tell you, some of the most uplifting occasions that deans experience are alumni events. You, as dean, personify the law school for your alumni, you bring them good news concerning the progress of your school, and they, in turn, want you to know how much the law school has contributed to their own successes.

Not only are the alumni with whom a dean interacts typically quite supportive of the law school, but many of them are wonderfully fascinating people. During my six years as dean, I have had the opportunity to get to know a senior alumnus of our law school who, among other notable achievements, was the federal judge who desegregated the University of Georgia and heard many other significant cases as a United States district judge. Drives with this judge to law school events in other cities have given me rare insights into the life of a lawyer and judge who is now in his late nineties and served as dean of our law school in the 1930s. These insights are invaluable, and the stories are even better. As the dean, they help me to weave and transmit the history of which all of our graduates are so rightly proud. The law school's oral history also plays a prominent role in the lunches of our "Golden Grads" that I convene each year, during which I sit back in amazement (and amusement) as these very senior alumni share their personal stories and those of the law school.

#### 8 *Service as Dean Involves a Unique Relationship with the Legal Profession*

Members of the bench and bar look to law school deans as representatives of legal education as well as the leaders of their law schools. Deans typically are asked to serve on bar committees and otherwise participate in the activities of the organized bar. No one should serve as a law school dean if she does not enjoy the company of judges and lawyers. For those who do, service as dean is a terrific opportunity to work with the leaders of our profession.

In addition to providing service to the profession, deans perform a crucial role in telling the story of their law school and of legal education to leaders of the bench and bar. There are unfortunate gaps between the reality of modern legal education and the perceptions of the bench and bar about what it is that law schools do. All too many judges and lawyers criticize today's law schools based upon their own law

school experience from many years past. Conversely, too many law school faculty members have a misperception concerning modern legal practice and its stresses, challenges, rewards, and satisfactions.

The dean is uniquely situated to carry information, formally and informally, between the legal academy and the legal profession. Through work on bar committees and in less formal settings, the dean also can help to develop and encourage joint programs involving legal education and the profession that work to the benefit of all concerned. The Georgia law schools enjoy an excellent relationship with the organized bar, the state and federal courts, and the Georgia Board of Bar Examiners, and the Georgia deans regularly meet with the Chief Justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, the Board of Bar Examiners, and other leaders of the bench and bar. Both professionally and personally, these relationships make deaning an interesting and enjoyable career.

#### 9 *Service as Dean Provides a Unique Perspective on Legal Education and Leads to Contact with Other Law School Deans*

Law school deans are asked to participate in various formal and informal activities within legal education. ABA and AALS committees seek out deans to serve on committees or speak at programs to represent “the dean’s view.” In fact, many (sometimes mistakenly) look to deans to articulate both the vision for, and reality of, American legal education.

Deans are, in fact, uniquely situated to observe and influence legal education at a particularly fascinating time in the development and growth of the legal academy. Both challenges and opportunities are presented to all law schools as a result of the admissions declines during the 1990s, the ascendancy of *U.S. News & World Report* and other ranking systems, the diversification and internationalization of law school student bodies and faculties, and the advent of distance learning and new technologies. An excellent way to learn about legal education, beyond the confines of one’s own school, is to serve on ABA/AALS accreditation teams. These site visits provide a fascinating snapshot into how another law school is handling many of the same issues presented to your law school and other law schools across the country. One returns from these visits with new ideas, both from the school visited and from other team members (who are themselves leaders at their respective law schools, universities, or within the practicing bench and bar). As Yogi Berra once stated, “You can observe a lot by just watching.” This certainly is the case with site inspection visits, which give law school deans a unique perspective on American legal education.

There often are several deans on an accreditation team, and, whether in this setting or more generally, interactions with other law school deans are among the most rewarding aspects of any law school deanship. One of the challenges of a law school deanship is that, with the exception of former deans, there generally is no one within the law school building who knows just what deaning is all about. On certain matters, often the toughest matters presented to the dean, the dean simply cannot consult with faculty or staff at her own law school. A wonderful resource, though, exists for all law school deans—the deans of other law schools.

Not only are deans some of the “best and brightest” leaders within legal education, but they are wonderfully sympathetic and helpful to other deans. This is, in large measure, because they, themselves, were mentored and helped by other deans in their formative years. There are fewer than 200 law schools in the country, and the great majority of law school deans participate, actively, in workshops such as the ABA New Deans’ Seminar and the annual ABA Deans’ Workshop. As a former co-chair of the Deans’ Workshop and the current chair of the New Deans’ Seminar, I cannot remember a dean who ever turned down a request for help. As Dean John Sexton of New York University once told me (speaking from his car telephone as he drove his daughter to Cooperstown), “I never say ‘no’ to a fellow dean.”

Law school deaning provides a unique perspective on legal education, and other law school deans provide a tremendously supportive network for the dean facing challenges within the law school and legal education.

#### 10. *Service as Dean Provides the Opportunity to Make a Difference*

The legal profession remains one of the most powerful professions in twenty-first century America. Law schools train the judges and lawyers who comprise this profession. As leaders of our nation’s law schools, deans are uniquely situated to make a difference within the profession, within our country, and within the world.

Law school deaning is a hectic, and sometimes a bit overwhelming, task. To thrive and prosper in such a position, one must remember why it is that law schools and legal education are so crucial to us all. I love to hear from, and interact with, graduates of our law school who have made a difference in the world around them. Every law school can boast of graduates who have, as an attorney or otherwise, made this world a better place in which to live. When we have an alumnus or alumna speak at our law school commencement, I survey the graduating students with the hope that one or more of them will return as a future commencement speaker because of accomplishments resulting from the legal training received at our law school.

During my time as trial attorney and senior trial counsel with the United States Department of Justice, my great aunt once asked me to explain just what it was that I did as an attorney. She then put that task into some greater perspective for me: “So you speak in court on behalf of the People of the United States of America. What a great honor.” Serving as dean of one of the less than 200 law schools in the United States: *that* is a great honor as well.

---

Some readers (presuming there actually are some readers) of this essay may consider the above “Top Ten List” somewhat naive and overly optimistic. On certain days and in certain situations, I, myself, would agree. But to be a good dean one must, by nature, be an optimist. Whether or not others agree with the optimism expressed in this essay, at least I now have something that I can pull off my shelves when I need to remember just why I have chosen to serve as a law school dean.