

# ED SULLIVAN AND I LOVE LUCY IMAGES OF DEANING—STUDENTS AS A KEY INTERNAL CONSTITUENCY

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MOST deans came into their positions directly from the faculty or after experience as an associate dean for academic affairs, where they had focused primarily on curricular development, faculty development, and the academic program itself. Fewer entered the deanship from the student affairs side. I am one of those who did.

## I. STUDENT AFFAIRS AS TRAINING GROUND

The year prior to entering the deanship at the Brandeis School of Law, I served as Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and Special Programs (with oversight over the University of Houston's six LL.M. programs and coordination of its many other special programs). My service in student affairs was much longer. I served for five and a half years at Houston as Associate Dean for Student Affairs (1988-1993). In that role I had responsibility for admissions, enrolled students, career services, and student organizations for the approximately 1100 students attending the Law Center, which has both full- and part-time divisions, six LL.M. programs, and a number of specialized programs and interdisciplinary courses of study.

It is my belief that student affairs is in many ways excellent preparation for the life of a dean. In this commentary, I will explain why I think that is so. In addition, I will offer suggestions to deans on how to ensure that student life is taken care of, as well as how to balance attention to student affairs issues with all of the other things that a dean must do.

First, let me explore why student affairs is such valuable preparation. When I think of my years handling student affairs, I am reminded of the *Ed Sullivan Show* and the *I Love Lucy Show*. Those of us who are old enough, recall how every Sunday night, Ed Sullivan would bring to our black and white TV sets the best of entertainment. The best comedians, the best animal acts, and, of course, the Beatles. I have vivid memories of the guy with the spinning plates. He would take a long pole and start spinning a plate at the end of it, balancing the pole on some sort of stand on the table. Then he would start spinning another one, and another, until there were so many spinning plates, you would hold your breath. Every once in awhile, even on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, a spinning plate would fall. Of course, the guy would quickly get it going again, and we learned that even the best sometimes drop things.

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As Associate Dean for Student Affairs, I remember this image and that every once in awhile, I had too many things going on at once, and one of the “plates” would fall. We would be trying to deal with an honor code crisis, while ensuring that a student who had spit on a faculty member was reported appropriately to the state bar character and fitness committee, while advising the student animal rights organization that they could not bring caged tigers to the law school to demonstrate cruelty to animals, while working with another student group to get them to understand that they could not sell week-old potato salad in the student lounge, while responding to a last minute request by a student with exam anxiety to have a take home unlimited time exam, while deciding whether we could revoke the admission of an applicant who we had discovered was Hannibal Lecter. (These examples are, of course, not actual incidents, but exemplify the *type* of issues that student affairs professionals deal with every day )

In addition to having too many different things going on, there was the problem of things happening too fast. That image for me is the episode of *I Love Lucy* where Lucy works in a cake-decorating factory. Her job (and Ethel’s) was to put icing on and decorate cakes as they came off the conveyor belt. There is a similar episode where they have to fill boxes with chocolates, but I like the cake-decorating image better. At first, Lucy is doing OK, but then the cakes come faster and faster, and begin falling off the end of the belt, and Lucy is not able to cope. Many days as student dean it was not just the number of different things (spinning plates) to deal with, but the speed required to respond.

I do not discount the heavy responsibilities of academic deans. They work as hard and long as student deans. But I believe that generally speaking, student deans have more spinning plates and fast cake decorating. And this is good preparation for the deanship. Since assuming the role as dean at the Brandeis School of Law, in August, 2000, I have found that while the types of issues I must deal with have changed somewhat—fundraising, faculty enrichment support, alumni functions, bench and bar functions, crisis management involving the computer systems, budgetary issues, meetings with the other campus deans and the provost, attendance at athletic events—the images of spinning plates and cake decorating are the same. The experience of having kept too many plates from falling off the pole and too many cakes from falling off the conveyor belt has helped me in juggling all of the things that I must do and in getting them done on time.

## II. BALANCING STUDENT AFFAIRS AS A DEAN

All law schools have someone responsible for student issues. It may be the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at a smaller law school (like University of Louisville) or it may be one or more individuals with responsibilities over different aspects of student life. Regardless of having administrators with those responsibilities, a dean still must be aware of and be involved with student life to some extent.

My general advice on how to balance student issues with everything else is as follows. Have excellent administrators who have good people skills, good judgment, and good organizational skills to handle student affairs. Make sure that both you and they have good relationships with key campus personnel—campus

police, student disciplinary officers, the student counseling center, and the office for students with disabilities. Have good policies and procedures addressing student affairs issues. Make sure that these policies and procedures are prospective and that they are well communicated to students (and faculty). If possible, develop handbooks on student policies generally, another on disability issues, and another for student organizations.

Try to get into the classroom to teach, or at least guest lecture on occasion. For me, the best time is summer school, because that is when there are the fewest potential conflicts requiring classes to be rescheduled.

Be sure to attend personally and participate in a reasonable number of student activities and be sure that your faculty are similarly involved. This can be challenging at a large law school where several organizations have spring banquets or receptions. Alert student groups of the need to give you ample notice about these events and be prepared to exercise diplomacy in advising them about why you cannot attend everything.<sup>1</sup>

Try to meet with key student leaders at least once a semester. These individuals can include the SBA president, the law review editor, the moot court board, affinity groups such as the Black Law Students Association, and so on. While the administrator responsible for student affairs should be meeting with these individuals frequently, the dean needs to meet with them at least once a semester.

### III. KEY AREAS FOR ATTENTION

Because student affairs professionals change and because student issues can become a crisis if not managed well, there are a number of things a dean should do at the outset of the dean's or a new student affairs administrator's service in the position. Attention to these early on may head off some potential crises.

First, be sure that the student affairs professional understands your general philosophy on student issues. For example, when do you want to know about a simmering potential crisis? When do you want to be involved in setting policy or decision making about student issues?

Second, be sure that some key issues are well addressed in terms of policy, practice, and procedure. The following are key issues that have the potential to become areas of crisis. In admissions, does the law school appropriately use the LSAT score? Does it comply with the cautionary policies from LSAC so as not to use automatic cut scores, etc.? Does the admission application impermissibly ask about disabilities or past mental health treatment? What is the policy regarding the use of race in the admissions process? If race is used, have the Department of Education guidelines about the appropriate use of race been followed?

For enrolled students, is there a well-communicated and effective process for addressing accommodation requests for students with disabilities? Is there a good process for evaluating documentation submitted with these requests? Is there a grievance process if accommodations are denied? How are students with mental

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1. It is always important to have in mind "appropriate remarks" when invited to any event. Often, without notice, a dean will be called upon to deliver "appropriate remarks," so it's best to plan for them, even if you haven't been asked to make such remarks in advance.

health related behavior or performance problems to be addressed? Is confidentiality of student records carefully maintained?

With respect to bar certification, how are questions from the bar admissions authorities involving mental health issues addressed? What is done when the bar authorities request information on how a student was accommodated on exams in law school?

Student publications can be interesting. How will the law school address limits on LISTSERVES and other computer generated communications systems? What if students start putting pornography or racist information out for everyone to see? Law schools have always had to deal with these issues with respect to bulletin boards and in student newspapers, but internet communication only adds new challenges.

#### CONCLUSION

Even though we have administrators to spin the plates and decorate the cakes on student issues, as deans, we also need to be prepared to spin a plate or two and decorate a cake now and then. Having student affairs staff with good judgment and people skills and having good policies in place that are well communicated are essential components of successful relationships between the dean and students. And always keep in mind that without students, we would have think tanks and institutes instead of law schools.