

## RUMINATIONS ON A DEANSHIP

*Colleen A. Khoury*

WHEN I was first asked to write this essay, I had just finished my first full year as Dean and was well into the second. Family emergencies and the press of time-specific Law School business intervened, however, and the essay was put off until now. As I write, I am beginning my fifth year as Dean. This was to be my last year, but the final stages of the Law School's Capital Campaign have added a sixth (and final) year to my tenure.

Approaching this essay at two different points in my deanship has been an interesting and illuminating experience. The notes I made for the first version of my "ruminations" are strikingly different from those I have made for this go-round. Different in kind and also in emphasis. It is not that those earlier concerns are unimportant now or have been fully resolved. They still resonate. But, they are no longer in the forefront of my thinking about my job. Other observations and concerns have taken their place.

The difference between the two sets of notes may be merely a reflection of my own maturation in the dean's job. Or, perhaps it offers yet another illustration of the complexity of the position of law school dean and the ways in which the varied and disparate demands of the job assert themselves at different times in the life cycle of a deanship.

A bit of background may be necessary to put these ruminations in context. I had been a member of the Maine law faculty for thirteen years before my appointment as dean. I had also served for two years as Associate Dean in the early 1990s—an experience that cured me (I thought) of any aspirations I may have had to become a dean. Some of my original concerns, and perhaps some of my later ones, may emanate from the special challenges (and benefits) of assuming the position of dean at an institution in which you have a long history and close relationships with colleagues on the faculty and the administrative staff.

In the first year of my deanship, gender assumed a larger place in my thoughts than I had imagined it would, and it surfaced in ways I had not expected. I am old enough (58 to be exact) to know what it is like to be the "only" or "one of the few:" for better or worse, I have learned to use humor and my own enthusiasm for spectator sports to make my way in a "man's world." Nevertheless, I did have some initial concern about how our alumni and especially our larger donors and other senior members of the legal and business community would respond to a dean who did not look like a "Dean."

To my surprise, I have been unable to detect any discomfort among our external constituencies as a result of my gender. (I recognize that I would probably be the last to know if there was discomfort. Folks who are uncomfortable usually stay away.) Indeed, the external responses to Maine Law's first woman dean have been extraordinarily positive. Alumnae clearly feel validated, and significant numbers

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\* Dean, University of Maine School of Law.

of our male graduates have made a point of telling me how proud they are that their *alma mater* dared to be different. At my first cultivation lunch with a successful older alum whom I had not met before, he handed me an unsolicited five-figure check, saying he was motivated to do so by the School's decision to hire me as dean.

Gender did seem to matter internally, however, in some ways I did not anticipate. I was taken by surprise, early on, by what I sensed was an unspoken expectation of some faculty and staff that, because I was a woman, I would manage differently. This seemed to mean that I would be "more understanding," which in translation meant that I would not act as a manager, as a boss. Several times, in that first year, I sensed some resentment when, after being a sympathetic and empathetic listener, I still needed to hold the individual accountable for deficient performance, missed deadlines, poor interaction with students and the like.

A few members of the staff routinely shared details of their personal lives with me while discussing their jobs and law school business. I am pretty sure that such matters were not raised in their conversations with my predecessor, except in cases of a family emergency, serious health problems and the like. This was not because he was an unsympathetic person. Rather, I think it was because the staff member would have thought it inappropriate to have such conversations with a male dean. Since those early days, I think that I have learned to navigate better the boundary between appropriate concern and inappropriate engagement, and I was a bit surprised to see this issue included on my list of topics for the earlier version of this essay.

One item at the top of my list of first-year ruminations was "the vision thing." I was totally unprepared for the staggering number of times I would be asked about my "vision" for the Law School—by alumni/ae and donors, of course, but also by members of the legal and business community who had only the most tenuous connection, or no connection at all, to the Law School. I felt myself in deep sympathy with George Bush the Elder. The word "vision" somehow connoted for me a fully worked out view of the world and Maine Law's place in it, and a plan with detailed instructions for how to get to wherever we were going. My early response was to stammer a bit, toss out some aspirational language, and then enthusiastically launch into a discussion of something we, or members of the faculty, were currently doing that seemed to connect to the aspirations. It was especially difficult to be asked the vision question when my faculty colleagues were present. I found myself judging my own response from a faculty member's perspective and tried to guard against sounding like a "P.R. person."

Over the last few years, I have gained some insight into the "vision thing." First, I have decided that, in many cases, this question is merely conversational filler. It just *seems* to be the sort of thing one should ask of a new dean. After all, what *else* is there to talk about! Not surprisingly, I am rarely asked that question today. Second, I now understand that a vision does not have to be a rewriting of the universe or even a blueprint. The person asking the "vision" question expects me to communicate a shared purpose and an enthusiasm for the enterprise. What is important is to articulate a sense of direction, not a road map. And, finally, I have come to realize that my colleagues *expect* me to be a P.R. person—that is, after all, one of the things they hired me to do.

During my first year, I was also struck by how ill prepared I was to manage a law school. As I said (on a subsequent occasion) to the fellow who handed me my first five-figure gift “It’s amazing that they would turn the running of a school over to someone like me. Before I got this job, I’d never managed anything but a secretary and a client load.” After several months on the job, I realized that my decade in law practice, while not a perfect training ground for an academic administrator, was indeed better preparation for the dean’s job than my thirteen years as an academic. The skills of juggling multiple tasks, responding to many and varied constituencies, working collaboratively, and moving, with a modicum of grace, from one project or person to another with little or no warning or preparation—from the minutiae to the mountaintop, as it were—were lessons I had learned in my years as a practicing lawyer. I just needed to dust them off and get them back into shape. It comforted me immensely to find that I *did* have relevant preparation for at least some aspects of this complex job.

How do my ruminations at the end of four years differ from these earlier ones? It seems to me that today’s list reflects a greater appreciation of the inherent complexity of the dean’s job, rather than the “doing” of the job. First, I have a keener understanding of the uniqueness of the dean’s place in the institution. The dean is really the only person at the Law School who sees the institution whole—as something larger than the sum of all of its varied parts. This is not to say that the dean’s view of the whole is more important or more accurate than the views of others. But, a dean does see the institution from a unique perspective—a sort of helicopter view from which one can see all the parts and how they work together and relate.

This aspect of the job has been a source of great joy to me. With each passing year, I have gained a greater appreciation of our Law School and the tremendous impact it has on our students and alumni/ae, our faculty, our State as a whole, and the world beyond Maine. One of the great challenges and benefits of being dean is the responsibility to serve as translator between and among the various constituencies. My engagement and interaction with our wonderful alums, for example, not only enhances my own appreciation of our School, but when relayed to the faculty serves to reinforce their sense of connection to the institution and the value of what they do.

But, I am noticing now that there are a few downsides to this unique perspective. Early in my deanship, perhaps because I had been a long-time member of the faculty, I was reluctant to make certain decisions without consulting broadly with faculty. I did this partially to better inform my decision, but also because I wanted to be seen by my colleagues as collaborative, not autocratic. I have noticed over the past six months that I have to fight the urge (or is it a desire?) to make some important institutional decisions without significant consultation and collaboration. I see a growing temptation to exalt my unique perspective—to dispense with process and make the decision that I now know is either (a) the only sensible one we can make, or (b) the one which my experience tells me is where we will come out after all the processing.

Some of this attitude comes from having seen this or that situation, or one like it, several times before. But, I suspect that my growing impatience with a more collaborative mode of decision-making comes from a dangerous tendency to think

that I am the only person who really sees all of the interests, all of the viewpoints, all of the needs. Three years ago, I could never imagine myself as one of those autocratic deans we all hear about. Now, I see the seeds of a benevolent despot in the making. So far, I have struggled successfully against this, but I am grateful that I will be rescued from such a fate by my self-imposed term limit.

The appearance of this tendency toward autocracy has led me to ruminate, in turn, about whether there are significant differences in leadership style between “recidivist” deans and folks like me—“terminal” deans, I guess you would call us. I am sure that there are special challenges to deaning for a long time, not unlike the challenges of a long-time teacher—how to keep the material fresh for you and for the students, how to address the complex issues without failing to bring the students along with you. I wonder now how I would manage a longer deanship, much less a second one.

Lately, I have noticed another consequence of the dean’s broader engagement with the institution. As a native New Yorker, I always felt some sympathy for Mayor Ed Koch’s “how am I doing?” question. We Type A’s want to know! It has occurred to me that a dean can never get a clear answer to this question. It all depends on who you ask. No one, except perhaps your assistant, really gets to see you in all of your roles as dean. I am continually struck by how little the various law school constituencies understand what I, as dean, do in the aspects of the job that they do not see. In the summer months, I am asked by alums, donor prospects, members of the bench and bar whether I take the summer off! Likewise, I find that faculty have little appreciation of the planning, number of visits and sheer effort involved in asking for a six-figure gift, or a five-figure one for that matter. So, I guess I will just have to satisfy myself with a partial response and wait to hear what they say to the candidates for the Maine Law deanship a year from now.

I have greatly enjoyed my tenure as dean at Maine Law. The job has presented me with extraordinary opportunities to learn about the legal community, legal education, our law school, my colleagues and our students and graduates. But, more important, it has helped me learn more about myself—my strengths, my weaknesses, my capacities and my reactions. I will step down at the end of six years not because I do not like the job—indeed, I have enjoyed it more than any job I have ever had. I will step down because I want to recover the fuller personal life that has been on “hold” for the last four years. I want more time with my husband; I want weekends, dinner parties with friends at *our* house, time to put the pictures in the photo album, and to do a home improvement or two. I have no doubt that my final year and nine months will present their own special challenges. I am looking forward to meeting them. It has been a great ride and I only hope that I can navigate successfully to the end of the road.