

ON BEING AN OLD ROOKIE

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PRIOR to my arrival at Loyola, I spent a number of weeks in my hometown of Sydney thinking about the first few weeks of my deanship. Following the old saying “first impressions are best,” I was anxious to convey the impression of confidence, capability, organization and vision. These traits were all tested during the interview process, but that situation is artificial and speculative. My musings enabled me to review over thirty years of law teaching and some fifteen deans I had observed in office.

At the risk of appearing smug, and conscious of the fact that a dean is as good as his or her last mistake, I began with some definite plans. These plans were not based on any theory of *deaning* but based entirely upon my own expectations of deans during my years as a law professor.

From a law professor’s perspective, I had always thought that *deaning* was about “atmospherics.” I wanted to be provided with an environment that encourages teaching and scholarship. Law professors are, for the most part, entirely self-motivated. In practically all cases, they could have been successful practitioners; and, having made the decision to enter academe, they always resent anything that diverts them from their main goal and that places any barrier in front of them. My experience indicated that, for the most part, people who have elected to enter the academy for a profession will push ahead in a self-motivated manner. It is when these same folk are diverted from their chosen vocation that internal dissatisfaction arises. And once it begins, it’s extremely difficult to stop. Also, once it begins, those involved tackle it in a manner consistent with their legal training, and what might appear to be minor problems are often magnified into major issues.

Faculty involvement in administration is slightly schizophrenic. Little can be achieved satisfactorily without faculty input and agreement, while at the same time decanal priorities tend to be readily accepted. When there is insufficient of the former and too much of the latter, disaster is not far away. Again, at least for the most part, law faculties accept constitutions and by-laws, and they will therefore accept the fact that some decisions are purely decanal. However, even where absolute decanal discretion exists, openness and information are imperative.

The first decision I made was a negative. I was not starting a new law school. Loyola had been operating for eighty years, had provided the Louisiana community with great service, and was beginning a new phase in its life as a result of a secure funding arrangement between the law school and the central administration. I decided that it would be totally inappropriate for me to arrive and announce changes that gave the impression that all that had come before was of little merit. I decided that, at least in the initial stages, the best plan of action was to build upon rather than replace.

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Some members of faculty would have been happy for me to make changes, provided of course they were ones that were in accord with their wishes but, in retrospect, keeping unbroken stock in the china shop was the best way to start.

As the weeks went by, it became clear that there was a long institutional history that had dictated many faculty attitudes. It also became abundantly clear that any suggestions for change should be made only after a careful investigation into this past history. Many had expended an enormous amount of energy, both intellectual and emotional, discussing and re-discussing a wide range of issues. And as is often the case, some of these issues were still awaiting final resolution and for some the scars were still raw. I was sure of one thing: innocence is no excuse. Even though there is a need to go "softly softly," the first semester of my deanship emphasized the long held belief about the decanal honeymoon.

Everybody smiled, and I understand that the general atmosphere, which had always been cordial, became even more so.

I confess that after so many years as a member of faculty, watching the process from the other side was interesting.

From the faculty's vantage point, the weeks prior to any new dean's arrival are usually filled with considerable speculation. The rumor-mill operates at full bore, and there is always some uncertainty. Knowing that following any decanal appointment there will be those who are pleased, those who are agnostic, and those who are positively annoyed, I tried to identify the members of the faculty who remained to be convinced. I looked at their files, identified their research interests, and tried to understand why their opinions may be as they are. I resolved that whatever steps I initially took must reinforce the attitude of those positively inclined, potentially sway the agnostic, and under no circumstances offend those looking for confirmation that their negative opinions were accurate.

There are few times in any job when all the stars are aligned, yet the first weeks of a deanship qualify. With the above in mind, I examined the list of things I thought needed doing and which came within the purview of decanal discretion. I chose three that I thought would have immediate impact on the entire law school community including the central administration and the alumni. I resolved that no one could complain if the law school building received a coat of paint, if the student recreation center was spruced up, or if the orientation program bordered on the lavish. I can report that the response was as hoped. We started with a bang and nobody was bruised. As far as the rest of the year is concerned, I should let others be the judge, although I seem to have come out the other end relatively unscathed.

I wasn't really aware of the amount of time I would spend "meeting and greeting" alumni and supporters. There seemed to be a constant tug-of-war between my development officer and my assistant regarding my availability to attend a myriad of functions. My hope that I could continue to teach one class each semester was immediately dashed when it became apparent that I would be absent from the law school at various times practically every day, and there would be no opportunity to arrange make-up sessions.

New Orleans is a city about breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners so watching my food intake has become almost as important as the dollars I am trying to raise.

As a faculty member I had often joined my colleagues in asking, "what exactly does the dean do?" There have been days since becoming dean when I have asked

myself the same question. This is the first job I have ever had where I can begin work at 7:30 am and leave at 6:30 pm and find absolutely nothing tangible that has been accomplished.

I had no idea how often faculty have queries about issues important to their careers. I had no idea how much time and effort would be expended dealing with issues relevant to the administrative staff. Without the protection of tenure, and in my opinion grossly underpaid, they are naturally more sensitive to small hiccups than secure faculty. I innocently asked one staff member to carry out a task that had, unknown to me, previously been within the province of another. This action caused considerable upset and required some assurance that it was not the forerunner of any major organizational rearrangement. It's become obvious that while these staff issues often appear trivial, they require thoughtful action, and any decanal off-handedness will have a detrimental effect on the entire law school operation. I have found myself skating on the seat of my pants when confronted with these problems and can only hope that the instincts and general life experience that has dictated my responses approaches the acceptable.

I had no idea how often I would be forced to deal with campus-wide matters, many of which have little or no impact on the law school. At the same time, there was not much reading available that detailed the tension that exists between undergraduate colleges and professional schools. This tension is often the subject of "coffee-table" chatter, although specifics are hard to obtain. After one year as a law school dean, I would recommend that all law deans campaign hard for the establishment of a medical faculty at their university.