

LONGEVITY

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IN some years, one-third of all law schools are looking for a dean. We often wring our hands and even joke about this brevity of law school deanships. One often hears that the three-year deanship is like the life of a mushroom: the first year you're kept in the dark; the second year you're covered in manure; and the third year you're canned. Or another: a deanship can endure but three crises. The outgoing dean leaves her successor three envelopes, to be opened when a crisis arises. The message in the first envelope says: "Blame the crisis on your predecessor." The second message advises the dean: "Form an ad hoc committee to resolve the crisis." The third message says: "Prepare three envelopes."

Though many a truth is said in jest, it's unfortunate, overall, that most deanships last three to five years. Whether a dean moves rapidly back to faculty work or "upward" to the next deanship or presidency, a brief deanship is detrimental to the institution. To be sure, there are occasions in which a quick decanal exit is the best solution to an untenable situation. But decanal churning and career puddle-jumping normally cause at least several major challenges for an institution.

The first challenge involves alumni outreach and support. Even if she were an internal dean candidate, known to some alumni as a faculty member, the new dean must establish herself as the school's leader in the eyes of all generations of graduates. She must establish dean-alumni relationships. When institutional issues or problems inevitably arise (e.g., the departure of a popular faculty member to another school), she must be able to draw upon a reservoir of good will in handling matters. Alumni trust translates into support for the dean's decisions. When the institution is making major changes (e.g., a significant revision of the core curriculum), alumni are reassured when they have faith in the dean.

The relations between a professional school and its alumni are unique. Since the profession includes the school's graduates, a stable relationship is necessary between the professional and educational leadership. Much of the success and growth of the law school—employment, student recruitment, CLE opportunities, and fundraising—depend upon this stable relationship.

Prosperous fundraising with graduates depends on a continuity of decanal leadership. Fundraising ultimately is about relationships. Most donors are going to contribute to *some* cause or organization. Giving involves not only donative ability, but also the inclination to contribute to one entity rather than another. It

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normally requires a series of meals and visits between a dean and a graduate for the optimal gift. Graduates tend to give to stable institutions and to deans they have come to know and trust.

Decanal longevity, secondly, can help address campus challenges. Except for a limited number of self-standing law schools, most are part of a greater institutional structure. The status of a law school is unique within a major university; professional schools are outnumbered by undergraduate programs (as well as by nonprofessional graduate programs). No campus has more than one law school. Defining and advocating for the law school's standing requires an appreciation of a campus, its infrastructure, resources, and politics. Understanding a campus takes time. How does the law dean simultaneously lay claim that her unit deserves treatment different from other (dissimilarly situated) units, while not inviting ambush of her unit with claims of elitism and selfish non-team-playing? That is to say, how does the law dean seek "special" treatment—i.e., my school can be the campus' crown jewel, since law schools can produce the best bang for the buck—without coming across in a way that ultimately disadvantages the law school? A claim of specialness in one helpful instance may isolate the dean in another instance, keeping a common resource from her or making her face a problem autonomously.

A long-standing dean usually can handle such campus conundrums more effectively than short-termers. Long-termers should have the university's confidence. They should have a feel—a context—for what to say and when to say it. For a law school to succeed, its university must permit it, occasionally, to color outside the bureaucratic lines. Experienced decanal leadership appreciates the subtlety of deciding when and how to deviate from the normal bureaucratic pattern. Deans must pursue such a course of action with as little fanfare as possible, keeping their supervisors in the loop, but staying under the radar of special-treatment protests by others. They must respect the food chain of authority, but cannot starve with an unmanageable diet.

Especially in tough times involving campus finances, long-standing deans can separate the wheat from the chaff better. They have a context from which to prioritize fiscal pressures. They know what financial changes matter, and which do not. (At bottom, they know the essential difference between a continuing versus a one-time budget reduction or addition.) Hopefully, their longevity and success afford them some leeway in responding to campus fiscal challenges (just as a baseball umpire may give the seasoned pitcher the benefit of the doubt on close calls). Assuming a good relationship between the dean and the campus leaders, they usually will have a productive history of partnering on financial challenges.

The third and final challenge to short-term deanships is broad and institutionally pervasive. It takes deans a while to build an internal administrative infrastructure and to commence the planning process with faculty and staff. Deans must establish solid relationships with staff and faculty both to ensure that the train runs on time—since the devil is in the detail—and to ensure that the train travels to new destinations—since a school must strive for new levels of achievement and excellence.

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The planning process presumes that the dean can delegate day-to-day duties sufficiently, so that she can be on the forefront of the school's big picture. It takes time for a dean and her key staff to establish an effective communication structure—how to keep the dean informed; when and how productively to frame key questions for her to answer; which matters can wait and which cannot; and how to prioritize.. By analogy, the dean and faculty together must establish a communications framework, ranging from items the faculty simply trusts the dean to handle—affording the faculty time and support to teach and write—to items needing elaborate communication and collaboration. The range of such items, and where items fit within that range, are not necessarily fungible from school to school. Faculties have traditions; some traditions are sacrosanct and some should be revised over time. Deans must come to appreciate an institutional context before big-picture planning and improvement is possible. A precedent of positive dean-staff and dean-faculty relations is necessary.

With revolving deanships, by the time the administrative team (hopefully) is functioning optimally, and by the time the dean (hopefully) has the faculty's trust, a leadership change can bring the school back to square one. Decanal continuity is the better alternative. When the administrative team is hitting its stride, and when decanal-faculty dialog is strong, a sustained deanship permits strategic planning and educational improvement. As with alumni and campus relations, the long-term dean needs stable linkages with faculty and staff for the law school to prosper, educationally and collegially.

Of course, long-term administrators must not get stale. They must retain their enthusiasm, creativity, and open-mindedness. A good teacher, year in, year out, must be innovative to keep herself and her students excited about the material. Deans with longevity need similar motivation; it is important to have new projects, challenges, and goals. But if a dean can combine experience and wisdom with flexibility and energy, longevity in leadership can provide institutional benefits.

So what does the long-term dean do when the fourth crisis occurs? When she is out of envelopes? She draws upon all the previous lessons she has learned and, in a word, she improvises.