

## BUILDING THE STUDENT CULTURE

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**A**LTHOUGH the office of student affairs clearly serves an important function within the law school, far too often, we deans see it as a support function: a set of costs that we must incur to keep up with our peers and keep our students happy. It is much more; namely, a great opportunity for a school to distinguish itself by building a stronger learning environment as well as creating a cadre of strongly supportive alumni.

The importance of student culture to the law school is often overlooked, yet our students are more significant to the long-term health of our schools than any other group or constituency. This is often difficult for we deans to comprehend. After all, we have spent most of our academic careers as faculty members, and we tend to believe that faculty and the scholarship they produce are the most important factors in determining the long-term success of the law school. But deans and faculty members come and go. In contrast, once a student enters an institution, he or she is connected to that law school for better or worse for the rest of his or her life. In many cases this connection will last for half a century. As a result, students and alumni will be our representatives to the profession and the rest of the world and will have a significant impact on our reputation and standing. Schools over the long-term are recognized and valued by the work and success of their graduates.

Over the past thirty years, a number of law schools have attempted to improve their overall reputations by aggressively hiring renowned scholars. In most cases, when the quality of the students has not improved at the same time, the schools have not been able to maintain or even enjoy gains in terms of reputation. Eventually, they also have seen the excellent faculty they have recruited move on to schools with better students. I know of no examples of law schools in which a long-surviving improvement in reputation has occurred because of faculty hiring when the quality of students has not improved as well.

For these reasons, our students are our greatest asset. I do not mean to denigrate the hard-working and talented faculty and staff that we all have, but as a group our students have far more collective talent and ability to achieve things than any of us. In addition, because they have the longest-lasting connection to the school, they have the greatest incentive to improve their school. From the first day they step on campus as students, they have almost irrevocably linked their careers and futures to our schools (more so than any dean, faculty member, or staff person has), and therefore have the most to gain from objective and reputational improvements in the school.

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## THE GOALS OF AN EFFECTIVE STUDENT CULTURE

So how should the importance of student culture affect the operations of the law school? One of the law school dean's top priorities should be to build a student culture that is attractive to prospective students and valued by current students, the faculty members who teach them, and the employers who hire them. Student culture permeates a number of different functional areas: admissions, student affairs, the curriculum and teaching, and placement, and all members of the law school (faculty, staff, and students themselves) are responsible for building and preserving this culture. It is not a role that can be assigned to the student affairs staff and then be forgotten. As in any complex organization, however, building an effective culture starts at the top, in our case, with the dean and must be reinforced by example.

*Reactive Student Affairs*

We start with a disadvantage: historically, student culture has not been a high priority at law schools. While many well-meaning faculty members did worry about their students, most students were expected to clench their teeth and tough out the often abusive law school experience. Similar to the experience of residents in our sister profession, medicine, it was a rite of passage that every law student had to endure.

In the 1970s, students began to demand a better environment and more assistance from their law schools. Deans, unfortunately, reacted to this pressure in the same way that most university leaders responded to the student demands of the 1960s and 1970s: they took palliative measures to quiet the unrest and get it out of their hair. The standard approach was to hire a dean of students to handle all the student problems and complaints in the hope that this would keep the dean's office more serene. Often the new dean of students was a faculty member of a particularly pleasant demeanor who tried to empathize with the students and respond to their self-identified problems but who had little or no professional training.

This, however, was a no-win approach in large part because it set up the role of the student affairs function as reactive. The role was to respond to student problems and complaints. Individual student counseling was the centerpiece of the job. Student affairs deans and staff did not have much status in the law school and were seen by deans and faculty members as necessary to address individual student problems and keep students out of the dean's office. A student affairs dean filled his or her day, from start to finish, with individual counseling appointments.

Not only is this a job description that is attractive only to a very small (if selfless) group of people, but it is also a recipe for escalating the problem. Once students had a place to go and someone to complain to, they demanded more resources of this type. Schools responded by enlarging student affairs staffs to address the increasing number of student problems and issues. It certainly is case that students come to law schools with more problems today; but as more

**Comment [s1]:** The changes you suggested here would completely change the meaning. It's not necessarily the faculty who are abusive, but the entire experience. Students can be quite abusive of each other too. So I removed the changes and brought it back to the original.

reactive counseling spaces became available, more were used by students, thus increasing the demand for more staff in this area.

#### *Proactive Student Culture*

Instead of this reactive approach, we must create a culture in which students are empowered to solve their own problems and achieve their goals. We are preparing our students to be effective and successful in a high-powered and high-pressured profession. Once our students graduate, they will not be able to complain to a student affairs staff member who will drop everything to solve their problems. Students must develop their own strategies for overcoming obstacles in a manner that does not alienate those around them. (Of course, there will always be a need for individual counseling and other forms of intervention in particular circumstances, but those needs should not be the primary focus of the student affairs team.)

In advocating this approach, I am not suggesting that we should return to the days of “tough love” and leave students to their own devices either as a matter of philosophy or to reduce administrative costs. That is not at all the case. If costs were a significant factor, Northwestern Law has done a terrible job. Indeed, our approach has resulted in an increase in costs as we have increased the size of our student affairs staff from two professionals with one support person in 1995 to nine professionals with four support staff today.

During that period, what we have actually done is reverse the role of the student affairs team. They are no longer employed merely to react to self-identified student problems. Instead, they focus on prompting students to create and maintain their own culture that supports each other. The student culture prepares each student to be effective in the professional world after graduation. That world is more and more competitive and challenging.

Our graduates will no longer be evaluated largely (if they ever were) on the technical legal analytical abilities they bring to a client or a firm. They certainly must have those abilities, but since their competitors will have them as well, what is important is how they solve problems, generate and maintain the trust of their clients, and work effectively on teams with other lawyers and on multi-disciplinary teams that consist of both lawyers and non-lawyers. Thus, we emphasize effective communication, organization, teamwork, and leadership. Our culture is student-led and based on working in groups to achieve results.

#### BUILDING THE STUDENT CULTURE

This theme runs through the entire Northwestern Law community from admissions, through the curricular and co- and extracurricular activities, to the career strategy process. It requires a coordination of all of the relevant functions: admissions, teaching, student affairs, and placement, and even involves alumni relations. The dean of students must lead, along with the dean, in pushing this culture forward. His or her primary duty is to set the tone of the culture and to push all students to contribute to that culture and adhere to it. The dean must support the dean of students in every aspect of this effort.

*Admissions*

While the culture of an institution will change people who come into contact with it, the importance of bringing in students who appreciate that culture and affirmatively choose to join it cannot be underestimated. Culture building starts during the admissions process. In addition to working closely with the dean of students, our associate dean for enrollment and career strategy also supervises our career management team so that his responsibilities with regard to our students come both before and after the efforts of the dean of students.

In the admissions process, we seek students with strong interpersonal and communication skills, and the demonstrated ability to work effectively with others on diverse teams. These are the skills that will make the difference for them in the workplace, so it makes sense to start out with students who have already begun to develop them. We do this by interviewing more than 75% of our applicants in the admissions process (our goal is 100%); we also insist that our applicants bring substantial, post-college work experience to the Law School. In this year's (2005) entering JD and JD-MBA class, 94% of our enrolled students had worked at least one year, 75% had worked two years or more, and over 50% had worked three years or more before matriculating (our goal is 100% with two years or more). In particular, we seek out applicants with work experience that involved leading and working on a team in pursuing and completing a project. The effect of these admissions requirements is that our students arrive at the Law School knowing better than college undergraduates how to get things done and how to respect and work effectively with others in an organization.

In addition, our culture is one of the most effective recruitment factors in our admission efforts. To bring in our new entering class, we strongly rely on our current students to communicate our culture to prospective applicants. Every year, more than 100 first-year JD and JD-MBA students participate in our admissions committee by planning recruitment events, interviewing applicants, leading tours, participating in question and answer sessions and helping to plan and organize our admitted students day.

Current students are our best recruiters. Applicants expect the admissions staff, dean, and faculty to boast about the law school. What is far more effective, however, is the information they gain from interactions with current students. Not only are those students more like them, but they also astutely realize that it is those students with whom they will be working and networking if they choose to come to Northwestern Law. Our current students also have a strong incentive to help recruit new students: they want excellent new students to arrive with whom they will work and establish long term relationships.

*Student Affairs*

Once a new class enters the Law School, the responsibility for building student culture nominally shifts to the student affairs team with the help of the faculty and staff. One significant symbolic move that I made from the beginning was to insist that the dean of students have the rank of associate dean and be a member

of my management committee, the key group of faculty and staff who set the Law School's strategy and budgetary priorities. With that position, the dean of students is better able to speak and be heard in the still very hierarchical cultures of law schools and the legal profession. It is hard to underestimate the value of a strong leader in this position. I have been fortunate to have three strong individuals in this position over my ten-year deanship and each has left behind a robust self-perpetuating culture.

In building the culture, deans and the student affairs team need to open the door and stand out of the way in order to empower students to contribute to the improvement of the law school. That means informing students of the strategy for the law school so that they can see the vision and help move the school in that direction. To do this, I meet weekly with the executive board of our Student Bar Association (SBA), the student governing body. When I cannot be there, the meeting goes forward with the dean of students. While respecting the privacy of individual students and employees, I candidly discuss the issues good and bad facing the Law School. I even discuss budgetary issues with them. In our system, the SBA sets up committees of students or student liaisons who focus on various functions in the Law School such as curriculum, student affairs, admissions, career services, faculty appointments, information technology and the library, and other areas. We urge those students to meet with the directors (staff or faculty) responsible for those areas, get to know them well, and then work with the directors to address problems and make improvements. They also communicate with their fellow students based on a strong knowledge of the strengths and strains that affect their area. The student committees and liaisons work through the SBA executive board and me to facilitate all this.

The key is a willingness to discuss student initiatives. I invite our students, from the first day, to work during their time here to improve the school. They are expected to propose change in a professional way—through well prepared presentations that include relevant research and statistics and that offer possible solutions or alternatives. In fact, we often ask student groups with proposals to present them at our alumni advisory board meetings. As a result, many of the innovations that have occurred at Northwestern Law have come from student leadership. For example, our Small Business Opportunity Center was created based on a business plan put together by students; likewise for our Public Service Strategy, International Team Project courses, and three new journals.

Of course, a dean must be ready to back good ideas when the students bring them forward and to candidly discuss the weaknesses in other ideas that cannot be readily implemented. If you are transparent about such issues and put them into the context of the overall good of the school, the students will be effective partners and even work to minimize a proposal's drain on financial resources.

During the early years of building our unique culture, it was quite apparent that our students were somewhat at a loss when it came to leadership and organizational skills. It is likely that they were challenged, in large part, because our work experience requirement in the admissions process had not yet taken hold. We began to look for ways to provide leadership training to help our students develop the organizational and leadership skills to use both in the Law School and more importantly in their professional lives.

In the past two years, we have provided Myers-Briggs assessments for students to give them one perspective on themselves and the others they would work with. And we now support two off-site leadership retreats for student organization leaders, one in the fall and a second in the spring. Like most other things here, the students largely determine the agenda and program. Student leaders help plan and execute significant school-wide events such as orientation and graduation.

More generally, we work to set a tone for the culture, from the very beginning, at orientation. The beginning of the first year is critically important in establishing the culture among the new students. During our orientation week, which is run by two student coordinators who have been employed by and work with the student affairs team over the summer, we have mandatory team-building for all new students (JD, JD-MBA, and LLM students together) that emphasizes working on diverse teams. During the first year, we also insist that all our first-year JD, JD-MBA, and LLM students go through our award-winning Lawyer as Problem Solver Program. The program consists of a series of free-standing two-hour modules that cover topics such as problem solving, negotiations, and professional responsibility. More recently, we added to the program exercises on networking and accounting and training in financial skills. The program is led by a faculty member who is the director of our Program on Negotiation and Mediation and is taught by up to twelve faculty members. It also involves a large number of upper-class student leaders who devote significant time to learning the curriculum and assisting in the execution of the modules by engaging in various role plays with small groups of up to four to six first-year students.

Throughout a student's time at Northwestern, we encourage an environment of professionalism. The focal point here is for students to think: "what if I did that on the job?" Since almost all have worked before entering law school, they understand the import of that question.

Early in my deanship, we faced something that had become far too common in law schools: some students (often following faculty models) believed that it was entirely appropriate to engage in debates on school and intellectual issues by belittling the people on the other side, whether it were fellow students or staff that they felt were not being responsive. The acts of a few students had a big impact on the rest of the students who were more responsible. In response, I took some firm actions in stating my expectations for responsible dialogue within our community and pointing out episodes that fell short of these expectations. I did not name names, nor was this an effort at "political correctness." This approach isolated the few and empowered the others to build a culture of respect. The result is a self-policing process, a trait of all effective cultures. Occasionally today, a student will send out an inappropriate e-mail, but without any push from me, or from any faculty or staff member, other students will respond by reminding the student of his or her obligations in our community.

One of the best things I learned from this experience is that while cultures can be very fragile, weak, and prone to disruption by just a few immature actors, a strong culture constantly renews and strengthens itself as generations of students pass through it. Unlike more general social cultures that count on people being involved for 50 to 70 years, a generation of law students lasts only three years at best. When we started out, I was concerned that we would do all this work with

the current group, but then each year a third of that group would walk out the door and we would have to start all over. As in the real world, however, it does not work that way. What happens is that the current students set the cultural tone for the new students, who adopt it and will pass it on to future students. In fact, each new group of students wants to improve the culture that it will pass on to its successors.

#### *Job-Searches and Career Management Support*

The student culture carries over to the job search and the team in the career strategy office. We set the tone by making our students aware that their first job out of law school is very unlikely to be their last job: on average, our students are engaged in their second law job search within two to three years of graduation. Given the mobility in the market today, this is quite normal.

Our students, therefore, need to understand that as they negotiate their multi-job careers, they will rely on the traits we sought out in admitting them and the traits that were emphasized as part of our student culture. While the first job search is not without its anxieties, our students are educated and understand that they need to develop their networks and the capabilities to assess their own abilities and desires on an ongoing basis to be successful in their careers. If we have done a good job of building the type of student culture I describe, they will be relatively more successful in their careers and in spreading the word about Northwestern Law.

#### CONCLUSION

Certainly, deans have plenty to do and many other constituencies to work with and relate to. As in any organization, however, the internal culture has a lot to do with the ultimate success of the organization. From the many meetings of deans at American Bar Association (ABA) meetings and other venues, I have observed that deans spend a lot of time worrying about faculty relations and managing their staff. While those are certainly important, I fear that we often give short shrift to our student cultures, which just in terms of numbers within our institution, dominate. For example, at the New Deans Seminar put on by the ABA every spring for new deans (of which, I confess, I have been the chair and member of the planning committee in the past), there have often been two full sessions devoted to faculty, while, when students are on the schedule at all (not always), only one short session is used to educate new deans on a broad range of functions from admissions to student affairs and student crisis management to placement. I have thought and continue to think that in terms of the importance to our success, for the reasons stated above this is a misallocation of time. To achieve the desired level of success, we all need to focus more training, time, and effort on building excellent student cultures.