

THE LAW SCHOOL SPECIAL EVENT: LESSONS LEARNED IN OUR TWENTIETH YEAR

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I. INTRODUCTION

2006 marks the Twentieth Anniversary of Regent Law School. Twenty years—enough time to gain significant experience and expertise on many matters. However, it is an amazingly short time in other ways. We continually learn new things, even about what would seem to be basic matters.

Take special events, for example. Law schools have many of them; they are a staple of the academic year. Yet as I sit and assess the past year, I think we learned more, from experiences both good and bad, about creating meaningful events than anything else this year.

In the summer of 2005, as we envisioned the 2005-2006 school year, we knew that special events would be a big focus of the year. In particular, we scheduled a special lecture series to commemorate our anniversary. We assumed that the series would be the most memorable event of the year. Looking back, it wasn't. Yes, we had visits from outstanding individuals and some thoughtful and provocative presentations. But those visits and presentations were not what made the year most memorable. Instead, it was other events, some planned with very little notice that taught us most about the place of special events in the life of the law school. In this short piece, I will describe a few of the year's events and the lessons learned from them.

II. SCHOOL CELEBRATIONS

Fall and spring semesters are incredibly busy. The pace of life is quick and “to-do” lists are long. As soon as we, as faculty and staff, have finished one task or project, we begin the next. There is always more to be accomplished, and we are always planning and looking ahead. We see more easily what is still to be done than what has been done. We rarely take time to pause and appreciate what we have accomplished.

One of our most vivid lessons last year was how important it was to break into this cycle of busyness and to stop what we were doing to simply celebrate. We did this at certain key moments last year. The first moment was in November when the Virginia Bar Exam results were announced. For years, improving our bar pass rate has been a top priority. We were surprised in 1999 when our first-time Virginia pass rate suddenly dropped to 40%. We made major program

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changes in response: (1) we dramatically increased our admission standards; (2) we completely revamped our Legal Research and Writing Program (now taught by four full-time writing professors); (3) we created an excellent Academic Support Program; (4) we thoroughly revised our curriculum; and (5) we increased the level of program rigor. The changes have borne fruit. Gradually, our pass rate has increased until it reached 71% for the 2005 July exam.

We were faced with a decision. Seventy-one percent is still a few points shy of Virginia's state average pass rate. We still need to see, and are confident that we will see, further improvement. The decision was whether reaching this interim point in our progress was an appropriate point to celebrate. We decided it was, and I am very thankful we did. This was a moment in which we had to force ourselves to look backward and not forward. Yes, we reached only an interim point. But it was a point that was higher than we had been seven years before.

Ours was a simple celebration; we ate cake and drank punch. But it was a chance to publicly praise men and women who had toiled long and hard to bring greater rigor and excellence to our academic program. We cheered our writing and academic success instructors, our admissions and marketing teams, and the faculty and staff as a whole. The entire law school team had a key role in our success, and we celebrated together.

Another key celebration took place during the spring semester when our Moot Court team won the ABA National Appellate Advocacy Competition over 151 other teams nationwide. It was a tremendous accomplishment by the team and a moment of great pride for the whole student body. Having come to a relatively young Christian school, our students sometimes wonder, "Can we really compete with the best out there?" This victory said to all our students: "Absolutely!"

The team won the championship in April. Classes were nearly over. The schedule was packed. But this was another moment we could not let pass. We scheduled a reception in our atrium at the time most classes finished for lunch. We provided hors d'oeuvres, cake, and punch and we celebrated our national championship team. But we also celebrated *all* of our students and coaches who participated in Moot Court, Negotiation, Trial Practice, and Mediation competitions during the year. We set up a table and filled it with plaques and trophies that the students won during the year.

The atrium was packed; students filled the floor and the balconies around. They cheered themselves and their friends. It felt like a high school pep rally! On short notice, during a time of high stress with finals looming, we were able to enjoy a moment of pure joy that was shared by the entire community. Faculty and students mingled, talked, and laughed. Together, we celebrated a success enjoyed school-wide.

Neither of these celebrations involved long-term planning. Dedicated staff members put together simple events on short notice. The events were not expensive or complicated, but they were highlights of the year. The key was that we celebrated community-wide successes *as a community*. We cheered each other. In the middle of the bustle, we stopped to see how far we had come. They

were times of joy and rejuvenation. We left both events much better prepared to face the projects and challenges that were still ahead.

III. STATE OF THE LAW SCHOOL LUNCHEON

On the day President Bush gave his State of the Union Address, I gave our first State of the Law School Address to students, faculty, and staff. The main motivation for the event was to give students a glimpse of the long-term vision for the law school. As deans, we constantly think about the vision for our schools. We frequently talk about vision in presentations and meetings with faculty, staff, and alumni. But we can sometimes leave out students.

The longer I have served as dean, the more I have become convinced that students, too, need to know about our plans for the law school that may be realized long after the students have graduated. Yes, students are focused on their immediate classes and job search. But their perspective is broader. They want to see the school succeed; they want it to make a long-term impact in the world.

When I teach classes now, I frequently share bits and snatches of this vision with my students. This has the very useful function of explaining why I travel so much and sometimes have to reschedule classes. But much more importantly, it gets the students excited about and invested in the school's future.

The State of the Law School Luncheon was an opportunity for me to share the law school's vision with many more students and in greater depth. While I spoke for about twenty-five minutes, the event was much more than a speech. Naturally, we lured students to this optional event with food. Good food—ribs, brisket, and other unhealthy items preferred by students, faculty members, and me. All of us enjoyed the informal time of food and fellowship. Again, it was an important time for us to come together as a community.

The students caught the vision; many later shared with me how energized they were about the school's direction. A few even offered their services to help on specific projects about which I had talked. Thus, we now have talented students using their gifts in ways we had not imagined before the talk.

While the luncheon was just an experiment this year, we will do it again. With the right combination of ribs and optimism, I believe this will become a key celebration in our school's life each year.

IV. BOARD OF VISITORS/STUDENT LUNCHEON

Another successful lunch event this spring involved our Board of Visitors. For years, men and women of distinction have provided counsel and support to me and the school as members of our Board of Visitors. Traditionally, twice each year Visitors spend a day at the school, meeting with me and other administrators. They hear a school update, provide feedback and advice, and work on Board committee projects. The meetings are great and very helpful to me. However, in the course of these meetings, Visitors can be somewhat isolated from the real life of the law school.

This year the Board desired to have a more meaningful involvement in the lives of our students. So, we experimented with a Board-Student luncheon. We scheduled the luncheon to last an hour and a half during a school-wide two-hour break from classes. Approximately 200 students came, again lured by ribs and brisket. We tried to maximize student-Visitor interaction by spreading Visitors throughout the room. The first half hour was completely free and unscheduled so that students and Board members could meet and talk informally. During the next hour, we held a series of four mini-panels. Visitors with similar backgrounds (judges, large firm lawyers, public interest lawyers, etc.) took questions from a moderator and from students on their practice, faith, and how they integrated the two. We kept the dialogue active and the pace quick. When the hour was over, Visitors stayed in the room and chatted informally with students who had individual comments or questions.

I must admit that I was not at all sure how this event would be received. Would it be like one of our many career panels that sometimes receives a lukewarm reception? Would students come? Would the dialogue be useful?

Perhaps it was the level of distinction of our Visitors. Perhaps it was the fast-paced dialogue. Perhaps it was the ribs. I don't know. But the students and Visitors loved the event. I did, too. It was another event that built our sense of community. It gave students some excellent role models as they envisioned their own careers. It gave the Visitors a much fuller sense of life at the law school than they traditionally received from my exciting PowerPoint presentation alone! The Visitors will be better ambassadors for the school because now they know us much better.

V. THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY LECTURE SERIES

So what about the Twentieth Anniversary Lecture Series? This I had assumed would be the highlight of the year—the focal point of our academic life outside of the classroom. In many respects the lecture series was outstanding. But for reasons I will share below, it was not the highlight of the year. Further, it generated more stress than it otherwise should have. We learned some lessons from our own mistakes.

On the positive side, the speakers were distinguished and the talks were thought-provoking. Jan Carnogursky, former Prime Minister of Slovakia, described his rise in a matter of days from political prisoner to Deputy Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia as communism fell in the 1989 Velvet Revolution. U.S. Solicitor General Paul Clement reviewed the most recent Supreme Court term. Virginia Supreme Court Chief Justice Leroy Hassell shared his thoughts on living a life of faith and integrity in the practice of law. Constitutional scholar and radio talk show host Hugh Hewitt challenged faculty and students to consider blogging to impact the culture around them. *World* magazine founder Joel Belz discussed the role of journalists of faith.

The talks were engaging and challenging. The interaction was excellent. So what was the problem? We struggled to get a respectable turnout of students and faculty at each event. In the days leading up to each talk, I grew nervous. I envisioned the Prime Minister of Slovakia traveling across the world only to

stand before a room of empty chairs. So I sent out desperate e-mails begging the faculty to talk up the event with students and to come themselves. In pursuit of attendance, academic integrity was pushed aside as professors offered students attendance incentives like a free day of not being called on in class.

In analyzing what we did wrong, our biggest problem was poor communication. Posted signs and inclusion in our weekly e-mail announcements were not enough to generate student enthusiasm or even awareness. There is no substitute for hype—lots of hype. In a world of multiple events and information overload, we had to get into classes and explain to students that these were not ordinary presentations. They were worth adjusting personal schedules.

Part of the problem was that we always seemed to get the word out late. We would finish one lecture and the next lecture was only two weeks away. We never gave students a good *early* overview of what the whole series looked like, and we scrambled with each event to figure out how we should notify and invite students and key outside visitors.

One concrete change we are making in response to this experience is to have a standing public relations protocol. If an event is planned, there will be no more discussion at the weekly dean's meeting of the sort: "So, how should we tell people about this one?" No, we should go to the protocol and follow the standard steps. It should be the same with breaking news. We should never have a starting-from-scratch group meeting asking how to get the word out. We should follow the protocol.

What else did we learn? We tried to do too much. Five lectures in two-and-a-half months taxed everyone. We should have spread the series out over both semesters. Given the number of other events and activities that took place during the law school semester, two or, at most, three school-wide lectures per semester would have been just about right.

VI. CONCLUSION

I look back on our anniversary year with a great deal of satisfaction. We ratcheted up the level of academic dialogue. We celebrated our achievements. We tried new things and got students more excited about the school's vision and their own future. We grew closer as a community. We also learned how to do all of these things better in the coming years.