

## A LETTER TO A NEW DEAN

*Glen Weissenberger\**

DEAR New Dean:

Five years ago, I too was a new dean. At that time, I wish someone had told me what I am about to tell you in this letter. I am not going to offer advice as to how to be an effective dean, or what are the principles of good management, or what are the likely land mines in your path. This letter is not designed to give that kind of advice.<sup>1</sup> Rather, my purpose is to put into perspective a number of the sobering, if not horrifying, messages you have heard about being a dean.

1. *A dean's life need not be "nasty, brutish, and short."*<sup>2</sup>

You have undoubtedly read articles and heard stories that describe law school deans as a miserable lot. According to these stories, deans cannot wait to leave the job to joyfully reclaim their prior life. The job provides no satisfaction, and only someone who is certifiably psychotic, or at minimum, seriously character-disordered, would seek such a position.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this letter is to disabuse you of the widely held belief that all deans are condemned to misery, and to reassure you that if you stay in the position long enough, all of the hellish miseries and hardships associated with being a dean are likely to be replaced by feelings of satisfaction and, on occasion, mild exhilaration. I am not saying that suddenly one day you will arrive at work and say, "Oh my gosh, what I was

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1. Compare, e.g., Jim Rosenblatt, *Lessons Learned by a New Dean*, 36 U. TOL. L. REV. 151 (2004); Steven R. Smith, *Deanings' Seven Deadly Sins*, 36 U. TOL. L. REV. 173 (2004); Rodney A. Smolla, *Nineteen Rules to Dean by*, 36 U. TOL. L. REV. 183 (2004).

2. Thomas Hobbes, a British philosopher, mathematician, and linguist, uttered this statement in his most famous work, published in 1651. THOMAS HOBBS, *LEVIATHAN: PARTS I AND II* 107 (Herbert W. Schneider ed., 1958) (1651). In this statement, Hobbes is referring to the quality of life in a pre-political state of nature. L. Benjamin Ederington, *Property as a Natural Institution: The Separation of Property from Sovereignty in International Law*, 13 AM. U. INT'L L. REV. 263, 271 (1997). This famous phrase has actually been invoked in legal scholarship to describe a law school dean's tenure. Victor L. Streib, *Law Deanships: Must They Be Nasty, Brutish, and Short?*, 44 J. LEGAL EDUC. 116, 116 (1994) (pointing out the high number of ABA-accredited law schools annually searching for deans).

3. See, e.g., Daniel J. Morrissey, *Harry Truman and the Joy of Deaning*, 35 U. TOL. L. REV. 153, 153 (2003); Peter Keane, *Interloper in the Fields of Academe*, 35 U. TOL. L. REV. 119, 119-20 (2003). Both deans describe meetings at which other deans bitterly complained about their stress and lack of satisfaction.

thinking? This deaning stuff is really awesome. It makes me giddy.”<sup>4</sup> I am suggesting, however, that as you invest yourself in the position and learn the subtleties of being a dean, there is a very good chance that those stories about miserable deans, who quit after a short term, will not apply to you.

Dean Kenneth C. Randall has written that it is unfortunate that most deanships only last three to five years.<sup>5</sup> He argues very persuasively that it is institutionally beneficial for a law school to have a dean who continues in the position for a longer period of time.<sup>6</sup> I whole heartedly agree with Dean Randall, and I strongly suggest that you read his essay. Nevertheless, I am going to make a somewhat different point. Not only is a dean’s longevity beneficial to the law school, it is also extremely beneficial to the dean. My essential premise is that the position of a deanship is likely to be a rewarding experience only after the dean achieves a moderate level of mastery of the position. How long does it take to achieve this mastery? I am sure it differs from person to person and place to place, but I am confident that it does not occur in one or two years.<sup>7</sup>

Now, as a minor digression, I will confess here that there were times during my first few years as dean of the College of Law at DePaul University, when I felt that I had made a monumental blunder in taking on a deanship after twenty-seven years as a law professor. I had never been an associate dean, an assistant dean, or an academic administrator of any kind. There were actually occasions when I would secretly plot an exit strategy, some graceful way to find a hatch leading to freedom that would provide as little embarrassment as possible. Fortunately, the feeling was never overwhelming. Even when a serious illness slowed me down and gave me the opportunity for that graceful exit, it only strengthened my resolve to stay in the position.

2. *Complete mastery of the deanship is an impractical, if not impossible, goal.*

Probably, the most stressful thing about the initial period of your deanship, and the part that makes some deans so unhappy, is that as a new dean you are put in charge of an enterprise that is so complex that you have no comprehension as to how it really operates. There is no way for you to know what unforeseen

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4. More likely, when you start to enjoy the position, the first sign will be that you will actually start looking forward to going to the office. Also, the strange dreams about being chased by mobs with torches will subside.

5. Kenneth C. Randall, *Longevity*, 37 U. TOL. L. REV. 127, 127 (2005). Some argue that the three-year figure is incorrect. See Jagdeep S. Bhandan, Nicholas P. Cafardi & Matthew Martin, *Who Are These People? An Empirical Profile of the Nation’s Law School Deans*, 48 J. LEGAL EDUC. 329, 330 (1998) (arguing, based on a two-year sample period, that on average, a dean serves almost five years). See also Laura M. Padilla, *A Gendered Update on Women Law Deans: Who, Where, Why, and Why Not?*, 15 AM. U. J. GENDER SOC. POL’Y & L. 443, 473 (2007) (asserting that the three-year figure is misleading and that those deans who survive the first two years go on to serve for five or more years (citing Frank T. Read, *The Unique Role of the American Law School Dean: Academic Leader or Embattled Juggler?*, 31 U. TOL. L. REV. 715, 716 (2000))).

6. See Randall, *supra* note 5, at 127.

7. Sure, there’s probably some extraordinarily talented person out there who has achieved mastery of the position in less than two years. Whoever it is, I would like that dean to tell us about it in the Leadership in Legal Education Symposium.

Winter 2008]

TO A NEW DEAN

401

consequences will result from any move you make. You have feelings that the whole thing will collapse by virtue of one ill-advised decision. Dealing with things that are incomprehensible is something that would make any reasonably well-adjusted law professor feel uncomfortable. Law professors by their very nature strive to become experts, and they find satisfaction in acquiring sufficient knowledge in a particular subject to enable them to teach that subject to other people.

The satisfaction or reward in being a dean is quite different. Based on my own experiences, over time, I have begun to understand how the deanship actually works at my law school.<sup>8</sup> I have never really completely mastered it, and I probably never will, but I certainly have a significantly better grasp of the deanship than when I started. As a result, my stress level is nowhere near where it was when I began, and my satisfaction in the job has grown exponentially. My guess is that many deans never reach the point where they feel like they are beginning to have an understanding of the totality of their position. This lack of comprehension is not only unnerving, but it deprives the dean of using his or her full creativity in functioning as dean. It is probably the reason why many deans quit after just a few years.<sup>9</sup>

To provide you, the new dean, with some reassurance, let me relate to you some of my own experiences as I began to deepen my understanding of the position that I have now occupied for five years.

3. *Your relationship with the faculty will change over time.*

Perhaps most importantly, I have created a rewarding relationship with my faculty that continues to deepen over time. At first, the faculty seemed to be an unpredictable mob, but over time I have been fortunate to develop a genuine bond with my faculty. While I have come to know and appreciate each of my faculty members in greater depth, the faculty has also learned to understand my style and to trust that style in terms of the advancement of the law school. For example, right away, I advised my faculty that I was not the kind of dean who would wander the halls and stop in their offices for folksy chats in order to keep my finger on the pulse of the law school.<sup>10</sup> At first, it was probably disturbing to some members of the faculty that I would be less visible than they would optimally want, but over time, I believe this slight disappointment was replaced by an understanding that one way or another, I do keep my finger on the pulse of the school. More importantly, the faculty began to understand that I am required to work long and hard, frequently in my office or outside the building to achieve the kind of results that the faculty and I want. Hall wandering would take me away from this important work.

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8. The kind of comprehension I am discussing is largely a matter of intuitive understanding. There is nothing linear about the process of comprehending a deanship.

9. See Randall, *supra* note 5, at 127.

10. Folksy doesn't work for me. I am originally from New York City.

As a new dean, you may be told that you will enjoy a so-called “honeymoon” period with the faculty.<sup>11</sup> You might think that this period is a benefit to you. In fact, the sooner the so-called “honeymoon” is over, the better. During the honeymoon period, the faculty does not make unreasonable demands; they are pleasant to you; and they do not test you in any way. Some might say<sup>12</sup> that the faculty are just not themselves. In actuality, the sooner you get to know your faculty exactly as they are, the better you will be able to develop your style as a dean. I actually realized this, and in several conversations with different faculty members early in my deanship, I declared the honeymoon over and invited the faculty to act exactly as they would if I were an experienced dean. In truth, I may be lucky because I really did not see an appreciable difference in behavior. Nevertheless, forget about the special rapture of the honeymoon period. It is the time during which your faculty is sizing you up and trying to figure out how to deal with you. Move beyond this period quickly.

4. *You will be enriched if you develop relationships with alumni that extend beyond fundraising.*

Over the years I have developed very strong relationships with many key alumni, and some of these relationships have developed into real friendships. It took time for me to convince our alumni that I was genuinely interested in them as people, and that I did not look upon them simply as potential donors. In fact, just having several meetings and conversations with individuals without asking for money tends to bring this point home. As alumni begin to believe that you are actually interested in their advice and counsel, they will become less guarded and more candid. They will provide you with a perspective that is different than that of the faculty or the university administration. They can become your most loyal allies. But again, it takes time.

5. *Over time, you will develop a sufficient mastery of the budget.*

Academic budgets are inevitably confusing and arcane. At first, as you try to understand the budget, you may start to believe that you are obtuse, but I guarantee you that the problem is not you. The problem is the budget. For me, the budget was an initially unfathomable mystery, and it has literally taken me years of experience to have any sense of mastery of the budget. Moreover, new deans must inevitably trust their budget managers, and this type of trusting relationship may be a new experience for any dean. As a result, you will be plagued with images of the law school bolting its doors because it has run out of money, or almost as embarrassing, that there will be money left on the table at

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11. I use “honeymoon” consistent with its secondary meaning: “An early harmonious period in a relationship: *The honeymoon between the new President and the press was soon over.*” THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 868 (4th ed. 2000). It is not my intent to use a politically incorrect or romantic term, but it is the label that is almost universally used in this context.

12. Not me.

the end of the budgetary period for the university to reclaim. Over time, the negative fantasies diminish. You will begin to understand the role that you must play with regard to the budget, and that your role is in fact quite distinguishable from that of the budget manager. It is a learning process. Stay calm. It takes time.

6. *Delegation is critical.*<sup>13</sup>

At first you have no idea who can be trusted with delegated authority. You might even avoid delegation and hoard all decisions for yourself. Over time, a new dean needs to exercise judgment as to the appropriate individuals to whom various responsibilities should be delegated. But until you reach a point where you know your administrative staff and faculty reasonably well, you will live with a level of discomfort that feels like you are loaning your most valued possession to a total stranger. You'll get over it. It takes time.

At first, everything is important. Every event must be attended. Every meeting requires your appearance. Every objective and goal of the strategic plan<sup>14</sup> deserves your undivided attention. And, when you are not doing everything when everything is important, you are thinking about it and probably agonizing about it. Over time, you will begin to sort through what is an important use of your time and what is a perfectly ridiculous use of your time.<sup>15</sup> As you begin to grasp and even start to master the whole enterprise, you will undoubtedly worry less, delegate more, find time for personal activities, and actually get a good night's sleep.<sup>16</sup>

7. *Your day-to-day schedule will be radically different than the schedule you enjoyed as a professor.*

As a new dean, you are constantly "on." Unlike being a law professor, you will not be spending hours of your day closeted away researching, reading, and developing brilliant theoretical paradigms. As a dean, your schedule is determined largely by other people. People stop by your office not just to chat, but to ask you for instantaneous decisions on relatively important matters. You are responsible for various ceremonial "welcomes." You welcome important people when they visit the law school. You introduce and provide a welcome for virtually every program for the public offered by your law school. You give speeches to alumni, potential students, and perhaps a radio audience here and there. You begin to feel like a master of ceremonies,<sup>17</sup> but over time, you will

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13. Even for micromanagers.

14. If there is one. If there isn't a strategic plan, you might feel compelled to write one immediately.

15. I was once asked by students to change the type of liquid soap in the lavatories. They wanted something "creamier." There is an obscure but important point here that interrelates to delegation. I told the student that I would have the associate dean look into it.

16. As to the related subject of dreams, see *supra* note 4.

17. It feels like a perpetual Jerry Lewis telethon.

come to realize that all of these opportunities to be the face of the law school, and to be the primary spokesperson who explains the mission and direction of the law school, are not as superficial as you might initially think. In fact, these opportunities become critical in communicating your vision for the law school, a vision which you can only have after you have begun to master the deanship.

8. *You occupy an important position beyond the law school walls and within the broader university system.*

For a first time dean, dealing with the central university administration is inevitably unlike anything you have experienced before. For example, at meetings that convene all of the deans of the university you will undoubtedly feel self conscious as you join an inner circle of men and women who likely have been at it for a long period of time. For those who suffer from the well known “imposter complex,” these meetings initially will be brutal. Here, perhaps more than any place else, you will inevitably feel that your ignorance will be demonstrated by a transparently brainless question, or a ridiculously indefensible position. Like all relationships, your association with your fellow deans and university administrators will change over time, and you will undoubtedly find that as a lawyer, your insights will be respected if not given great weight. Like all new relationships, it takes awhile to reach a level of comfort.<sup>18</sup> Give it time. It will happen.

9. *Cultivate the unique strengths you bring to the deanship.*

Finally, keep in mind that the first day you arrive as the new dean of your law school, you will occupy a position that was created by somebody else who possessed a whole package of personality traits, aspirations, goals, and visions that are not necessarily yours. Over time, you will deconstruct and reconstruct the deanship to reflect your own persona.<sup>19</sup> It will not happen immediately, but at some point it is likely that you will come to own the job. At that point, it is very unlikely that the deanship is a position that you will give up until a number of years have passed. Getting to that point of mastery may take awhile, but ultimately, if you stay with the process for a reasonable amount of time, chances are that you will come to discover that being a dean is a genuinely rewarding and fulfilling experience. It just takes time, and three years may not be enough.

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18. I am assuming here that you are smart, and of course, you are. Some really smart people picked you as dean, and selected you to be the representative of the law school in the administration of the university. As to the imposter complex, just get over it.

19. This would not be an academic essay if I did not use the word “deconstruct” at least one time. A careful reader may also have noted that I previously used the word “paradigm.”

Winter 2008]

*TO A NEW DEAN*

405

Sincerely yours,

Glen Weissenberger  
Dean and Professor  
DePaul University College of Law

P.S. I just signed a contract for a second five-year term as dean of the College of Law at De Paul University.