

## REFLECTIONS OF A NOVICE: FOUR TENETS FOR A NEW DEAN

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### I. INTRODUCTION

THE invitation to contribute to these outstanding essays on decanal leadership presents an invaluable duality. Work on the project has prompted probative reflection on my first year as dean and the lessons of leadership that were endemic in that experience. Additionally, I hope the essay that has resulted from my contemplation encourages and assists others who serve or contemplate serving law schools in this special way. This duality confirms, at least for me, the gratification one gains from working as a dean and reinforces the importance of planning, perspective, and connectivity in the successful accomplishment of such an extraordinary job.

As my new role as Dean of the Wake Forest University School of Law became a reality, a composite of emotions consumed me. Excitement, a more intuitive emotion, initially reigned supreme. I assumed a service that could impact the aspirations of many, further an institution's trajectory, and change my life considerably. Accompanying excitement, however, were uncertainty and angst regarding the significant demands of the job. I also felt the pressure to help define and realize a vision for the law school while simultaneously maintaining a balanced personal life.

Anxiety over unknown challenges that would lie ahead became a dominant emotion as I assumed the deanship. For me, the adage "ignorance is bliss"<sup>1</sup> had little validity. The world of a dean included an evolving stream of unknowns that were ubiquitous and challenging. These unknowns compelled rigorous study of the institution with the commensurate duty to employ the acquired knowledge to

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1. The phrase "ignorance is bliss" has broad application in the legal academy. *See, e.g.,* Douglas G. Smith, *Structural & Functional Aspects of the Jury: Comparative Analysis and Proposals for Reform*, 48 ALA. L. REV. 441, 497 (1997) (explaining "ignorance is bliss" as applied to scholarly discussions of the efficacy of the jury system).

every decision. This study taught me to remain flexible and open to accommodate the new experiences that the unknowns presented. Intense study of every aspect of the law school, consultation with my constituents, and deliberate decision-making combined to minimize the anxiety associated with unknowns. I also gradually appreciated the natural linkage between unknowns and the excitement of working toward a vision for the law school. As a result, the job became a stimulating challenge that confirmed my decision to take on this dynamic new role.

This essay attempts to distill from my first year as a dean several lessons for others who contemplate becoming a dean or will actually assume this fulfilling job. The essay has as its fulcrum the following four tenets gleaned from the totality of my experience.

## II. "LIGHTS, CAMERA AND ACTION"—CREATE A SYNERGISTIC VISION AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

A new dean's responsibilities commence as soon as the appointment is announced. Amid the cacophony of welcomes to the new job is the opportunity to discover the assets of, and challenges that confront, the law school. The information gleaned during this time can become a valuable tool in formulating a plan to advance the law school.

Detailed study of materials supplied during the dean search process shaped my expectations about the breadth and nature of my responsibilities. After appointment, my initial thoughts and expectations became guideposts for a focused vision for the law school. Successful construction of that vision, however, required a thorough analysis of the law school's present challenges and opportunities. The period between the announcement of my appointment and my official assumption of the job presented the perfect opportunity to begin this analysis. Information gathered during this time formed the basis of my plan to advance the law school. The euphoria associated with appointment also provided the momentum necessary to inspire others to realize a vision that would define and distinguish the law school for years to come.

A pivotal point emerged from the preliminary stages of my new deanship: an effective dean must have a visionary plan that advances the collective interests of the law school.<sup>2</sup> This plan must address the needs of the law school and establish goals that define and reflect the collective aspirations of the faculty, staff, students, central administration, and alumni.

Creation of a truly visionary plan requires the amalgamation of interests of those who are vested in the law school's future. To accomplish this goal, a new dean should communicate continually with every constituency of the law school, including the faculty, staff, students, alumni, and central administration. This

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2. See E. Thomas Sullivan, *Decanal Leadership: Managing Relationships*, 31 U. TOL. L. REV. 749, 749 (2000) (stating that a dean, as leader, must have a visionary plan for the law school and successfully communicate that plan to all constituent groups of the institution). See also Janice C. Griffith, *The Dean's Role as a Member of the University's Central Administration*, 35 U. TOL. L. REV. 79, 82 (2003) (noting that a dean's vision should assist in achieving "societal goals").

effort, which should commence soon after being appointed, signals a new dean's energy and willingness to engage this new role. Continual communication with the law school's various constituent groups not only yields invaluable information about the ethos of the institution, but also commences the essential process of establishing substantive relationships with the key constituencies. The discovery of critical information, solidification of relationships with constituent groups, and comprehension of the law school's ethos establish the foundation for, and eventual acceptance of, a visionary plan.

Study and communication were my primary tasks prior to the official commencement of my deanship at Wake Forest. I reviewed, with more focused intensity, the law school's ABA Questionnaire and read the minutes of all faculty meetings from the previous two years. Anecdotal information from interviews with the faculty, students, alumni, and staff provided a holistic overview of the law school's history, culture, and potential for strategic change. The totality of my pre-dean study guided my thoughts about the law school's future, stimulated ideas for the visionary plan, and paved the way for a smooth transition to the official beginning of my deanship. This comprehensive study also provided clues as to what would be needed to realize the visionary plan.

While a visionary plan incorporates input from the law school's constituencies, it must also bear the dean's imprimatur. The dean's ideas for the plan should both supplement and complement the law school community's goals and aspirations. A thoughtful evaluation of what is needed to advance the law school should ensure the efficacy of the dean's ideas and the compatibility of those ideas with the law school community's aspirations. Subsequent to the plan's creation, the dean must secure its adoption by the faculty and central administration. The formal adoption process establishes the plan's institutional relevance and vestment by the institution as a whole. If the plan incorporates ideas reflective of the interests of the various law school constituencies, adoption should be a *fait accompli*.

A new dean's duties emerge naturally from an adopted plan, which will also shape the direction of the deanship. Despite conscientious efforts and best intentions, these duties and goals may change due to unforeseen circumstances. Unpredictable circumstances constitute significant unknowns. This unavoidable reality requires a dean to remain open and flexible to implement the plan.

### III. "NO ONE IS AN ISLAND"—ASSEMBLE AN EFFECTIVE ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM

A visionary plan's formulation and implementation, and the efficient operation of a law school require more than a new and energetic dean. To be effective, a prospective dean must have an adroit, motivated, and cohesive administrative team that ensures the efficient operation of the law school and advancement of a visionary plan.<sup>3</sup> Such a team is an indispensable asset that will help to advance institutional objectives with minimal supervision.<sup>4</sup>

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3. See Timothy J. Heinsz, *Deaning Today: A Worthwhile Endeavor—If You Have the Time*, 31 U. TOL. L. REV. 615, 617 (2000) (expressing that a successful dean must have a strong

Building an effective administrative team requires a focused evaluation of available personnel. The most common starting point in the assembly of such a staff is the selection of an associate dean for academic affairs (ADAA). This critically important staff member functions as the law school's chief academic officer and often fills in for the dean in her absence. The individual in this key position should enjoy the respect of the law school's constituent groups, including central administration. The ADAA must be deeply familiar with the law school's structure and, thus, either have had a fairly extensive tenure at the law school or possess keen intellectual and interpersonal skills to quickly learn the law school's ethos. Impeccable judgment is a key asset for the ADAA and she must have the energy to assist with the management of the law school and achievement of the visionary plan. Because it is a demanding job, the ADAA must have the dean's full confidence and support. Without it, the ADAA could be doomed to frustration and possible failure.<sup>5</sup>

An effective staff must also include individuals who are responsible for student affairs and the general administration of the law school.<sup>6</sup> While competency is a minimal requirement, individuals chosen for these administrative positions must possess a team-like spirit that fosters a unifying *esprit de corps*. The dean should encourage this spirit in both formal and informal settings,<sup>7</sup> and continually emphasize that cooperation is a valued objective. A cohesive staff that works as a team not only contributes to the efficient function of the law school, but also ensures operational support for complete fulfillment of the visionary plan.

#### IV. "YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND"—SEEK CONNECTIONS

To lead a law school effectively, a new dean must form reliable and lasting connections with vital law school constituencies, including the faculty, students,

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administrative support team); Sally Waters et al., *Memorial: Madison M. Mosely, Jr. (1950-2005)*, 97 *LAW LIBR. J.* 613, 613 (2005) (noting that an administrative team must be loyal and supportive of the vision for the future); Judith Welch Wegner, *The Modern Law School Comes of Age: The Deanship of Kenneth S. Broun (1978-87)*, 73 *N.C. L. REV.* 641, 651 (1995) (recognizing the importance of a strong administrative team to "help carry the burdens of the ever-more-demanding office of the deanship").

4. See R. Lawrence Dessem, *Top Ten Reasons to Be a Law School Dean*, 33 *U. TOL. L. REV.* 19, 21 (2001) (noting that the "modern law school dean does not lead alone, but with and through a cadre of other senior administrative leaders," which can be a gratifying experience for a dean).

5. Having served as the ADAA at my previous institution, I appreciate fully the absolute requirement that the dean lend her complete support to the ADAA.

6. My definition of individual members of the executive staff is not meant to suggest that the staff, as a whole, is confined to its deans and senior administrators. The "staff" includes everyone who assists in the accomplishment of the law school's vision and mission, including technical staff, administrative assistants, and other service personnel. All of these key supporters of the law school constitute a constituency that the dean must respect, motivate, and inspire to embrace the law school's vision plan. See Kenneth C. Randall, *Staff Matters*, 34 *U. TOL. L. REV.* 153, 153 (2002) (discussing the significance of non-instructional staff in the success of a law school).

7. For example, to maintain the team spirit of my staff, I have continued a tradition of celebrating each staff member's birthday at a dean-sponsored lunch.

alumni, central administration, and the local communities.<sup>8</sup> Positive relationships with these constituencies provide reliable allies who can help advance the visionary plan. As a result, connectivity becomes an essential objective.

Maintaining connections remains a continual challenge. The respective interests of each constituent group do not always converge, and the dean must somehow advance the law school's overall goals while respecting each constituent group's divergent interests. More often than not, decanal decisions, regardless of their relative importance, can be counter to the interests of one or more of these groups. This eventuality requires the dean to emphasize continually that her decision-making will be fair, consultative, and rooted in the best interests of the law school. Consistent reinforcement of this credo through constant communication fosters respect for decanal decisions, regardless if they occasionally frustrate individual expectations.

Connectivity should never be taken for granted. The dean must constantly seek opportunities to engage each constituent group and, while doing so, focus attention on the visionary plan. As a result, frequent travel to maintain alumni support becomes a vital and continual duty.<sup>9</sup> Faculty engagement, in the form of collective and individualized meetings, ensures the faculty's support for the dean's objectives and their vestment in the visionary plan.

An often-underrated constituency is the student body. While students may not have veto power over a plan, they certainly can affect its achievement. Students are, in my view, the lifeblood of the law school and, as future alumni, carry with them a sense of commitment to the institution that launched their professional careers. As Dean Kent Syverud notes, students constitute the most endearing legacy for academics.<sup>10</sup> An astute dean, therefore, recognizes the importance of students as a constituent group and always seeks ways to ensure that group's support. Frequent and varied contact with students can be enjoyable and deliver considerable dividends. Events such as brown bag luncheons or "fireside chats" keep students informed, inspire their confidence, and signal their integral role in the advancement of the law school.<sup>11</sup>

Connections with constituencies outside the law school, such as central administration, the local community, and national colleagues and institutions, complete the package of support that is vital to the dean's success. In my view, the dean's effectiveness relates directly to the support she receives from the university's central administration, especially the provost and president. If properly persuaded, central administrators can greatly assist in the realization of a visionary plan. To secure this support, the dean and faculty should contribute to

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8. See *supra* notes 2-4 and accompanying text (noting the need to communicate with various constituencies to formulate an effective visionary plan).

9. See Dessem, *supra* note 4, at 22-23 (observing that alumni are typically judges and lawyers who are committed to the law school and its success); Wegner, *supra* note 3, at 651 (commenting generally on the importance of relations and partnerships with law school alumni).

10. Kent D. Syverud, *Taking Students Seriously: A Guide for New Law Teachers*, 43 J. LEGAL EDUC. 247, 259 (1993).

11. In addition to attendance at key functions of student groups, I also regularly host breakfasts with small groups of students throughout the year.

the vitality of the university through service.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the dean must appreciate and adopt, to some extent, central administration's goals and vision for the university as a whole.

Adoption of central administration's goals and vision requires the dean to determine how the law school's plan might incorporate these goals or somehow tangentially assist in the achievement of central administration's vision for the university. Although the law school's plan may not accommodate all university goals, it should complement some aspect of central administration's ultimate vision for the university. Incorporation of the university's goals into the law school's visionary plan constitutes "interest conversion," but is by no means a simple task. It requires the ingenuity and flexibility to augment the law school's visionary plan with one or more goals of the university. Although success in this effort can be elusive, the mere attempt to accommodate university goals, together with regular dialogue with key university administrators, maximizes the potential for central administration's support of the law school's plan.<sup>13</sup>

Other external constituencies, such as local judges and lawyers,<sup>14</sup> professional groups, other educational institutions, and national colleagues and associations, can lend invaluable support to a new dean's efforts to advance the law school. Outreach to these groups can lead to synergies that can assist with implementation of a visionary plan. Connections with these external constituencies can also generate positive "buzz" about the law school, extend its influence, and enhance its reputation as a concerned member of the community—a quality that alumni, community leaders, and central administrators generally appreciate.

A new dean also garners huge dividends from connections with fellow deans. The ABA's Deans' Listserv is a supportive resource for advice on virtually any issue that arises during a dean's tenure. Additionally, the New Deans' Seminar,<sup>15</sup> also sponsored by the ABA, and the deans' meetings during the ABA's mid-year and annual meetings are superb sources of information and vehicles for networking with both new and experienced deans. The New Deans' Seminar, together with the Deans' Listserv, becomes a quasi-"dean's advisory council" that is readily available to counsel any new or experienced dean. Interaction with this council can be both helpful and gratifying. The almost

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12. See Griffith, *supra* note 2, at 86 ("The law school dean serves as an essential communicative link between the university and the law school."); H. Reese Hansen, *Except for the Problems, Being a Dean Is a Very Good Job*, 33 U. TOL. L. REV. 77, 79 (2001) (noting the importance of a dean and law faculty to participate in university committees and university life).

13. See Griffith, *supra* note 2, at 87-88 (discussing the need for a law school dean to understand a university's position).

14. See Lisa A. Kloppenberg, *A Mentor of Her Own*, 33 U. TOL. L. REV. 99, 100 (2001) (advising deans to engage such external constituents as judges and lawyers).

15. See Robert K. Walsh, *Advice from the New Deans Boot Camp*, 34 U. TOL. L. REV. 185, 185-86 (2002) (noting the successes of the New Deans Seminar). See also Jon M. Garon, *To Make a Difference: Dean as a Producer*, 39 U. TOL. L. REV. 297, 298 (2008) ("From the first day of the New Deans Seminar, we learn that we are all much more alike than we are different."); David E. Van Zandt, *Building the Student Culture*, 37 U. TOL. L. REV. 171, 177 (2005) (discussing the value of sessions on faculty and student relations at the New Deans' Seminar).

fraternal spirit among law school deans can be an antidote for the loneliness that often plagues them.

Former deans comprise a vital connection and an exceedingly rich resource for a new dean. These individuals possess a wealth of knowledge on numerous matters relevant to the law school, including faculty, staff, and university politics. They also tend to have established relationships with key alumni and other external constituencies with whom a new dean must connect.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, soon after appointment, the new dean should immediately seek the counsel of the most recent former dean. This effort must be conducted with a sensitivity that reflects the respect and deference due to an individual who has already performed this demanding job. If properly nurtured, the relationship with the former dean can become an invaluable resource throughout a new dean's tenure.<sup>17</sup>

The necessity of connections, both internal and external, confirms that a successful dean cannot work alone. John Donne wrote that "No Man is an Island,"<sup>18</sup> and this is particularly true for a dean, despite the job's inherent loneliness. Perhaps the most effective initiatives that I have implemented as dean have been shaped by input from constituencies both inside and outside the law school. This collaborative effort strengthens a visionary plan and ultimately enriches the social fabric of the law school.

#### V. "TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE"—PRESERVE YOUR PERSONHOOD

The final tenet of this essay focuses on the personhood of the individual who becomes the dean. In my view, a successful dean possesses a keen sense of self. In other words, effective deaning requires acute self-awareness. The dean should be continually reflective and appreciate the personal strengths and weaknesses that she brings to the job. Self-examination comes somewhat naturally to me due to an upbringing by a strong matriarch who stressed the importance of self-awareness.<sup>19</sup> This exercise, though neither natural nor easy, remains significantly revelatory and educational as one works as the dean. Knowledge of one's own

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16. See generally Wegner, *supra* note 3, at 647 (noting the value of connecting with such external constituents as neighboring universities and local officials). Carefully cultivated, the prior dean can become a confidant of sort and an effective sounding board for your ideas and solutions for future problems.

17. I had the good fortune to follow as dean the legendary Robert K. Walsh, who served as Dean of the Wake Forest University School of Law for eighteen years. Dean Emeritus Walsh remains an important and trusted colleague as I continue to grow in my role as dean. I greatly admire and respect Dean Emeritus Walsh, whose successful tenure as dean has made him an incredible resource. I respect his stature and have reaped the benefit of his sage counsel on a number of complex issues.

18. John Donne, *XVII: Nunc Lento Sonitu Dicunt, Morieris [Now, This Bell Tolling Softly for Another, Saies to Me, Thou Must Die]*, in *DEVOTIONS UPON EMERGENT OCCASIONS* 86, 87 (Anthony Raspa ed., 1975).

19. Self-examination for me revealed a need to appreciate flexibility. My tendency to plan meticulously can sometimes lead to frustration when unexpected circumstances interfere with personal agendas. A dean's life is filled with unexpectancies. I, therefore, make a conscious effort to "expect the unexpected." I now am less flustered by events that interrupt a planned agenda and can adjust to accommodate changing circumstances.

strengths and weaknesses encourages a more individualized perspective on problem-solving, assists in developing effective strategies for leadership, and keeps a new dean grounded.

One must also strive for personal balance as the deanship progresses. The incredible demands of the job can easily consume a new dean. The often-intense need to succeed prompts a single-minded focus on work and the resultant neglect of more personal responsibilities and interests. Ceaseless focus on work may eventually breed frustration, particularly if the dean foregoes outside interests that she pursued prior to her assumption of the deanship. Many deans whom I know, and presumably many of those whom I have not met, tend to be multifaceted individuals with fascinating talents and outside interests. Maintaining a sense of “self” and ultimate satisfaction with the deanship requires that deans nurture that multiplicity as much as possible. Pursuing outside interests while working as dean fosters personal well-being and “total personhood.” To remain fresh, engaged, and happy, the dean must strive for a healthy balance between dedicated professional work and a satisfying personal life. This balance, which ensures the maintenance of “self,” complements effective deaning, secures one’s personhood, and facilitates longevity in the job.

## VI. CONCLUSION

During the 2007 New Deans’ Seminar, Deans Linda Ammons of Widener University School of Law and Louis Bilionis of the University of Cincinnati College of Law spoke eloquently of their first-year experiences. Dean Ammons analogized her first year in the job to popular songs. While the exact titles that she quoted escape my memory, her anecdotes prompted me to think of such songs as “Don’t Cry Out Loud,”<sup>20</sup> “I Made It through the Rain,”<sup>21</sup> and “Bridge over Troubled Water.”<sup>22</sup> To these popular references, I add an historic narrative that has inspired my work as dean.

In 2003, I had the privilege to present the commemorative Thomas More lecture at St. Dunstan’s Church, in Canterbury, England.<sup>23</sup> That honored duty prompted an intense and focused study of Sir Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor of England who refused to capitulate to the political ambitions of King Henry VIII. Thomas More paid the ultimate price for that defiance and remains an inspirational figure for many professionals, including lawyers, politicians, and academics.<sup>24</sup>

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20. MELISSA MANCHESTER, *Don’t Cry Out Loud*, on DON’T CRY OUT LOUD (Arista Records 1978).

21. BARRY MANILOW, *I Made It through the Rain*, on BARRY (Arista Records 1980).

22. SIMON & GARFUNKEL, *Bridge over Troubled Water*, on BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER (Columbia Records 1970).

23. The Thomas More lecture is an “annual lecture devoted to More’s teachings, philosophies, and life.” Blake D. Morant, *Lessons from Thomas More’s Dilemma of Conscience: Reconciling the Clash Between a Lawyer’s Beliefs and Professional Expectations*, 78 ST. JOHN’S L. REV. 965, 967 (2004).

24. *See id.* at 967-68 (stating that More’s contextualist approach can serve as an example to professionals caught between personal beliefs and the expectations of those for whom they work).



More's narrative has impressed on me the importance of conviction, even when confronted by overwhelming challenge. This lesson, in my view, has great applicability to anyone who becomes the dean of a law school. In a poignant scene from the motion picture based on Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*,<sup>25</sup> Thomas More dramatically emphasizes the importance of personal integrity and convictions:

When a man takes an oath ... he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water.... And if he opens his fingers *then*—he needn't hope to find himself again....

[I]n a State where virtue was profitable, common sense would make us good, and greed would make us saintly. And we'd live like animals or angels in the happy land that *needs* no heroes. [Charity, modesty, justice and thought aren't always profitable, perhaps we must stand fast a little, even at the risk of being heroes].<sup>26</sup>

Duty and fortitude, which Thomas More personified, are linchpin postulates for any new dean. A duty that has as its foundation the advancement of a vision formed and fulfilled through the coalescence of multiple constituencies becomes somewhat of a Holy Grail for deans. Achievement of that duty requires fortitude that ensures the realization of the law school's vision. In a sense, successful deans will not only stand fast as More suggests, but also stand together with various constituencies to advance the law school and, I hope in the process, become heroes in legal education.

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25. ROBERT BOLT, *A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS: A PLAY IN TWO ACTS*, at xii-xx (1962) (recounting the latter part of More's life and eventual trial and execution).

26. *Id.* at 140.