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A FEW REFLECTIONS ON A LONG DEANSHIP

*John D. Feerick**

WHILE sitting in the lobby of the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin last July, waiting to have dinner with Dean James White and considering what to say in this article, I thought that I might start with the events of the month leading up to that meeting. Those events began with a school trip to Italy with a group of about twenty J.D. alumni, followed by the launching of an LL.M. alumni chapter in Italy. I then moved on to Ireland where I participated in my school's first summer program abroad, a collaborative program with Queens University in Belfast and University College in Dublin. These all were wonderful experiences, experiences that underlined the value of the relationships and friendships I have had the good fortune to make as dean. Thinking of the thirty-nine students who participated in the Ireland program, most of them strangers to me when the program began, and realizing that they have become part of a precious memory of times together, brought home the value of the relationships one forms as a dean. The joy gained from those relationships is very much at the core of serving as a law school dean. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Nothing in my background gave me any real insight into what I could expect when I left law practice in 1982 and accepted an invitation by Father James C. Finlay to become dean of the law school from which I had graduated. Although a number of people questioned my decision, including my father but not my wife, I concluded that it would be exciting and meaningful to do something different with my life. I entered the position at age 45 and now have turned 65. I had planned to serve for about five years to help the school accomplish a new building program and set a course for its future. At that time I thought that I might return to practice, or teach, or enter some kind of public service, including judicial service, but I had no agenda as to what might follow, preferring to concentrate all my energy on my new position.

Somehow, without realizing it, I have stayed twenty years, devoting the prime of my life to the work of deaning. Where did the years go and why have I served so long? I have asked myself these questions many times. Indeed, I have commented facetiously at times that I have done "such a good job" that I am unemployable. Yet, as I look back, I find a sea of truly wonderful relationships and friendships in my wake and opportunities to serve my profession that probably came along because I was a law school dean. As for the world of relationships, I'm told that more than one-half of the current graduates of my school have passed through it during my years. While there were many I did not know when they were students, I considered all, in a sense, as members of my extended family. Some whom I did not know as students have since turned to me for employment or other assistance, and I have sought out others to help achieve the school's goals.

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Relationships have developed with the many graduates who preceded my arrival, usually originating when I represented the school at functions important in their lives. Every time I have done so I have felt blessed because I have sensed the importance to them of “their” school being there, whether it has been at the opening of an office, installation as a bar leader, induction as a judge, or a wedding, christening, or hospital and sympathy visits. The rewards a dean receives from his or her representational role are enormous. For me it has been a very special part of the position.

The connection between forming relationships and fundraising, an area to which I, like all deans, have dedicated great effort, is clear. David McCarthy, a very successful dean at Georgetown who was concluding his tenure as I began mine, commented to me that he should have devoted more time to fundraising. I didn’t quite understand what he meant, but now I realize how much can happen at a school if funds are available. New buildings, new programs, scholarships, and other ingredients important for a successful law school require so much of a dean’s energy. Fundraising has been difficult at times for me, as when a graduate declines to meet, sensing that I might be asking for money, or does not respond after a meeting. Yet, what joy there is when academic chairs, programs, scholarships, and physical plant improvements become possible because of these meetings and requests. I will forever be grateful to those who taught me how much joy there is in being part of another’s generosity.

My role with the faculty has taught me the importance of treating each one as an individual, responding to his or her accomplishments and needs, helping all to contribute in some way to the school by recognizing their different talents, and seeking their assistance in the running of the school as associate deans, committee chairs, directors and the like. Some of the greatest successes of our school during my tenure are directly, if not wholly, attributable to the leadership of faculty members. These include a nationally-recognized clinical program; the Stein Center on Legal Ethics, which enjoys an active national presence; a Public Service Resources Center that serves as a model for others; the Joseph Crowley International Human Rights Program, which has received world-wide attention; an LL.M. program that has brought to the school lawyers from all over the world; and highly successful Annual Conferences on International Antitrust and Intellectual Property.

In addition, as dean you have the opportunity to make and appreciate so many other relationships. You get to know justices and judges, practicing lawyers, public officials at all levels of government, and colleagues who are deans and professors at other law schools and in other schools within your own university. The friendship opportunities are incredible, and when you serve for a relatively long period of time, the memories you accumulate take on great meaning in terms of a life in the law.

One aspect of deaning that I did not expect is that it gives one a front seat from which to observe and learn from others who contribute so mightily to the legal profession and the community at large. I have been privileged to watch and be inspired by the dedication of so many lawyers, but three stand out—Cyrus Vance, the late Robert McKay, and Dean James White. While the contributions of Cyrus Vance and Robert McKay are well known in the legal community, a word about Dean White may be in order, as those not involved in legal academia may not be aware of his contributions. Dean White was constantly in the storm center,

responding to schools or universities unhappy about the pressure generated by accreditation reports and dealing with assaults on legal education by the justice department and others. Kind, gentle, and ever so committed to the quality of legal education, Dean White successfully dealt with these challenges in a way that serves as a model to all who know him. I feel fortunate to have him as a friend.

As dean you also have a heightened opportunity to contribute yourself. I have found my service on committees of the American Bar Association Section on Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar, and within the bar of New York City, to be particularly rewarding.

All of this is not to say that law school deaning is without moments of stress. For me, those moments have involved preparing for American Bar Association inspections (especially as a young dean), handling disciplinary matters involving students, negotiating the fiscal relationship between my school and its university, and dealing with sensitive issues involving faculty members. These moments, however, pale in comparison with the moments associated with helping a student or graduate, or contributing in some way to the school as, for instance, by joining with the faculty in evolving the curriculum, adding a new program, or setting the course for the future of the school.

My final reflection has to do with keeping abreast of and becoming immersed in all the changes going on outside that call for responses by the school if it is not to be left behind. The changes of the past twenty years that I have found to be the most interesting involve the convergence of the technology revolution, the emergence of clinical education, and the increasing importance of public service within our law schools. Consider what can happen during a long deanship.

I. TECHNOLOGY

Our school was founded in 1905, and for most of its history—like most other law schools—its curriculum was centered almost exclusively around teaching through the Socratic method and the examination of appellate court decisions and statutes. In the pre-computer era, research in primary sources—though well-indexed and cross-referenced—could be painfully slow and frustrating. Under this system, students and faculty alike often spent incalculable hours in the law library—much like a latter-day Christopher Columbus—exploring many areas of the legal map which might, or might not, end in the desired discovery.

The traditional methodology, which my generation of deans inherited from a distinguished line of legal educators, remains as strong as ever. The curriculum is still rooted in the basics, leavened by new cases and legislation reflecting our ever-changing world. At the same time, the manner in which we use legal materials to teach, learn, and research is—in its own way—undergoing a revolution that is as significant as any single advance in law school training of the last hundred years. Equally important is the impact that computers have had upon law school services.

When I assumed the deanship of my school, our faculty, administration, and support staff used typewriters for the majority of their work product. Yellow note pads and spiral-ringed notebooks were the staples for our students, and the one harbinger of things to come was a single, red Lexis computer terminal, which occupied a rather small room in the law library. In those days, the most important

thing about computerized legal research was scheduling access to the computer terminal itself.

Today, in contrast, the school provides computer access to many hundreds of users, including faculty, administration, and student organizations. There is also a student computer lab, a technology training room, and access for hundreds of laptop computers in classrooms and in the law library's two reading rooms. Additionally, the school has a Wide-Area Network, which provides directory services, drives for storage of personal files, and links to the law library's catalogues; and the law school's web site includes faculty-teaching web pages.

Another exciting new technological development has been the Virtual Classroom, a program that allows faculty and students to participate in electronic discussions of cases and other legal material online. A professor may initiate a discussion by posting a question about a case and then having a dialogue, via computer, with various members of the class as they submit their responses throughout the day. It is not unexpected to have students post their responses at two or three in the morning. All of these resources make available a stunning array of opportunities to build upon the lessons of the classroom.

Unlike my generation, students today can read statutes, cases, regulations, and other legal material from the comfort of their own rooms and homes. Using the school's website and assigned access codes, they can research thousands of law review articles, notes, essays, and other legal materials, and print a hard copy of the text in the computer lab or by using their own personal computers. Even more amazing to me—as one of a dwindling number of deans who still rely on their faithful yellow (sometimes white) legal pads—is that students and other members of the law school community can access this material from some of the more computer-literate coffee shops around town, using a local modem to connect to the Fordham law library reserve desk by way of the Internet.

Technology already has changed the way we teach, and it takes little imagination to see new issues looming on the horizon. One with which law school deans must soon grapple is what place, if any, should some type of distance learning have in our law schools.

Technology also has changed the way in which the school presents itself, and the World Wide Web provides us with a forum in which to tell our story throughout the world. Between August 2000 and February 28, 2001, the school's website received an average of 67,101 hits per day, communicating more information about us in a day than we were able to disseminate in weeks using printed brochures. In the near future, my school will have a Virtual Reality Tour, which will enable visitors from around the world to visit the school's library, classrooms, cafeteria, computer center, and other points of interest.

The school's admissions office and the registrar's office also have felt the impact of the new technology. About 90% of our applicants download the application form from our web site, and we now accept student applications online. Technological advances also mean that the registrar has more accessible databases and can manage his office's voluminous records more efficiently. Technology has made it far more pleasant for our students to register than it was in the past. Remember long lines of impatient students who eventually were registered with index cards? Today

registration as well as access to grades can be accomplished by a phone call or through the World Wide Web.

II. CLINICAL EDUCATION AND PUBLIC SERVICE

While computer technology has made possible many new and exciting resources, the law school remains, at heart, an institution dedicated to educating the next generation of lawyers, increasing knowledge of law and related fields, and providing legal assistance to the communities in which we live. Key to these missions has been the growth and development over the last twenty years of clinical and public service programs. These programs can be found at a great many schools today, but only a few had them twenty years ago. Please indulge me as I illustrate by reference to the evolution at my school.

Our Clinical Program, directed by Professor James Cohen, has grown so rapidly in the past decade that, in 1997 it needed to move off campus in order to accommodate student interest and to provide space for clinical faculty. Today, twelve full-time professors work with hundreds of students in one or more of ten clinical programs. These programs focus on such areas as battered women's rights, children's disability and special education, civil rights, community economic development, criminal defense, family and child protection, justice and welfare, mediation, securities arbitration, and tax litigation. Although their primary purpose is to provide fundamental skills training to students seeking to work in these areas, they also help members of the community who lack representation in critical matters involving their health, safety, and financial well-being.

Complementing the Clinical Program, and making a significant contribution on its own terms, is our Public Interest Resource Center, the brainchild of Assistant Dean Thomas Schoenherr. It administers thirteen student-run organizations at the school—including organizations working in the areas of the death penalty, domestic violence, immigration, family court, housing, and unemployment—and provides a convenient way for approximately half of the student body to engage in some sort of public service during the course of their studies. In addition to supporting these thirteen organizations, the Center holds an annual auction, among the most successful of its type in the country, which funds summer fellowships for about fifty students working or interning in public service jobs. Perhaps the most outstanding component of the Center is the Stein Scholars Program, which offers stipends, specialized course work, and placements to students who plan careers in public service.

CONCLUSION

As you see, a deanship at an United States law school is a unique experience. It is not a place for someone looking to relax or paddle in calm waters. It is demanding beyond belief but the rewards are many, making it an interesting, challenging and even exciting way to live part of your life as a lawyer!

