

The Measure of a Dean: A Tribute to Dean James E. Meeks

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Imagine the qualities that make a law school dean special. Then think of Dean James E. Meeks. The congruence is so great that the overlap between imagination and reality hardly leaves a shadow.

Law school deans ride the waves of fortune, buffeted by the whims of capricious state legislatures, a besieged central administration, an ambitious yet individualistic faculty, an eager but distracted alumni base, and a dream-filled student body. The law school dean faces this tempest alone, equipped with only the strength of character and the power of personal values that the dean brings to the task. James E. Meeks brought character and values aplenty to the Ohio State College of Law.

Jim arrived at the law school from the faculty of the University of Iowa (a birthplace of deans) in 1978, loaded with credentials and optimism. A graduate of Oberlin College and Columbia Law School, he had the perfect pedigree for the College of Law:

- Clerkship at the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia (Judge McGowan).
- Successful teaching career at the University of Iowa.
- Author and authority on regulatory law and public policy.

Dean Meeks served as dean until 1985, six years of accomplishment and service. My sense is that he would have served even longer had an auto accident not robbed Jim of the fire that he knew was essential to doing the job at the level he wanted to sustain. That is because what Jim Meeks cared about the most was the well-being of the institution he led. He continually asked what sacrifices he could make for the institution, rather than what sacrifices the institution would make for him.

Dean Meeks cared deeply about the law school, the people who made it great, and the potential it had to make great people. He was not a person who wanted glory for his own sake; he wanted glory for the institution and its people. His ambition was great but it was a quiet ambition, radiating outward rather than inward, and radiating without fanfare or fluff. It was the ambition of substance, not form; the ambition of getting the job done well, rather than the ambition of appearing to have done the job well.

Jim knew that a successful dean builds the right culture among the faculty and staff, working to bring unity out of individuality and a common sense of shared destiny out of disparate faculty agendas. He and Priscilla hosted faculty

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parties in their home; Jim hosted faculty retreats at various state parks to build a stronger, more unified faculty; by inviting outside speakers, he sought to bring the spark of outside ideas to ignite the flames of faculty creativity.

He was a good listener, sympathetic and empathetic. He processed what he heard and was candid in stating his disagreement, while appreciating the advice he had been given. He cared about the well-being of his faculty and staff, and was sensitive to their interests, goals, and personal issues. He was never judgmental of the person, nor even of ideas that did not resonate with him. He accepted human foibles as an inevitable part of living together in a community.

Dean Meeks led with courage and conviction. He was not afraid of personal failure; his only fear was that the institution would not reach its potential. He found no task too daunting and no challenge too unpleasant. My fondest memory of Jim focuses on an early morning meeting when a small group of us gathered at 7:30 AM in his office to consider where to make university-mandated budget cuts. A thousand small cuts take their toll on an institution, but Jim faced the budget-cutting predicament with characteristic resolve and commitment, confident that he could make the required cuts without hitting any arteries. He listened patiently to the various suggestions of the assembled group and then acted decisively, avoiding either the self-pity that could accompany the resulting losses or the outward show of frustration that would dispirit the faculty. As always, it is courage under pressure that defines leadership. Few faculty fully understand the pressures a dean faces, the cross-current menu of choices to be made, or the time that robs a dean of that most rare resource: reflection. Through it all, Jim displayed confidence and optimism, trusting in his own leadership and never showing the disappointments that were an inevitable part of the job.

The impact on the law school was formidable. If you dusted for fingerprints at The Ohio State College of Law you would find those of Dean James E. Meeks wherever you looked, in the library, the legal clinic, in faculty offices, and in the classroom. The legacy of a law school dean is not in the institution's outward garb but in the institutions inner culture and spirit. That made Dean Meeks a very successful dean.