

Nova Law Review

Volume 17, Issue 4

1993

Article 5

Acting Dean I Have Known, 1978-79, 1984-85 & 1985-86

Steven Wisotsky*

*

Copyright ©1993 by the authors. *Nova Law Review* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/nlr>

Acting Dean I Have Known, 1978-79, 1984-85 & 1985-86

Steven Wisotsky

Abstract

Writing a tribute to former acting deans is a challenge: usually, it is troubled times that push them to the fore, and one measure of success is how quickly they can bow out and turn over the reins to a permanent successor.

Acting Deans I Have Known, 1978-79, 1984-85 & 1985-86

Steven Wisotsky

Writing a tribute to former acting deans is a challenge: usually, it is troubled times that push them to the fore, and one measure of success is how quickly they can bow out and turn over the reins to a permanent successor.

The first Nova dean was Peter Thornton, and when I interviewed for a faculty job he was in office. By the time I came on board a few months later, he had been replaced by Larry Hyde, a former judge. Barely three years into Larry's tenure, the university experienced a major financial crisis. Counting its chickens before they hatched, the university was devastated when a \$14 million bequest from the late Leo S. Goodwin, Sr., progenitor of the GEICO fortune, was withheld by the estate's manipulative trustee. Part of that \$14 million was dedicated to the Law Center, and it was seen as the key to our final ABA accreditation.

Although the situation was no fault of Larry's, the faculty felt the need to have strong crisis managers protecting the Law Center's interests during the deadly duel between the estate's trustee and Nova University. Don Llewellyn and Bruce Rogow, the two most senior, experienced faculty members, emerged as the leaders. The plan was for them to serve as co-deans, although, as Bruce later quipped, Don was the codeine and he was the cocaine (or was it the other way around?). The plan was to divide the deanship into domestic affairs under Don's aegis, and foreign policy, meaning relations with the university, in Bruce's bailiwick.

It was a very acrimonious time in the history of relations between the Law Center and the university, as we came to realize the degree of mismanagement that had prevailed for so many years and the failure of the board of trustees to take appropriate corrective action. Fortunately, the immediate pressures of the crisis did not last too long, and by the end of that academic year we had a new permanent dean, Ovid Lewis, to assume office in a building off campus, formerly the home of the Operating Engineers Union, at 3100 S.W. 9th Avenue.

We moved into the new facility, and things went pretty well for the next five years or so. The student body grew, the faculty grew, the Goodwin estate came through, and our final ABA accreditation was

awarded. Of course, there were problems, but on the whole it was a period of success.

But then the second financial crisis came in 1984. In many ways, it was worse than the first, because there was no hope of a major bequest in the pipeline to bail us out. The financial problem then prevailing has a very contemporary, Washingtonian, ring: a chronic budgetary deficit. For example, in the four year period preceding that crisis, the university had accumulated additional debt of \$13 million, against a total annual budget of less than \$30 million.

The immediate precipitating need for an acting dean was Ovid's decision to accept a position as Vice President for Academic Affairs at the university. Although the university administration wanted Ovid to continue as Law Center dean, Bruce argued that this would be a conflict of interest, and Ovid shortly thereafter resigned the deanship and accepted the other position. Once again, the vacuum of authority had to be filled. Bruce, who was most senior (and this time had actual on-the-job experience), was the logical choice. He wisely shared the responsibility and increased political consensus by forming a managerial triumvirate consisting of himself, Joe Smith and me. Although his actions had virtually insured that he would have to take on the decanal responsibility, Bruce was deeply ambivalent. His family responsibilities were growing, with two small children and a third soon to come. His activities as a litigator had taken off. He did not want the day to day hassles of running the law school. As it was, he caught pneumonia before his term ended. No doubt it was stress-induced.

The dean search produced no acceptable candidate by the spring of 1985, and Bruce made his intention to vacate the acting deanship clear in many ways. For example, he left for Europe after spring classes ended; Joe and I shared the thankless task of setting faculty salaries for the following year. Before his departure, he had talked to me about coming forward as acting dean, but, with my father dying of lung cancer and a second child on the way, the last thing I needed was a new set of responsibilities. To his credit, Joe Smith stepped up to the plate and held things together during the following academic year while the dean search produced Roger Abrams.

How then should we assess the tenure of acting deans serving during times of trouble? I think it can be said of them all that they did what was necessary to keep the place going and to give us hope for a better future.