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# The Tenure of a Law School Dean: It's Not How Long You Make It - It's How You Make It Long

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THE TENURE OF A LAW SCHOOL DEAN:  
IT'S NOT HOW LONG YOU MAKE IT—IT'S HOW YOU  
MAKE IT LONG<sup>1</sup>

*Jim Rosenblatt\**

IN May 2003, I attended the New Deans Course in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. This event took place several months before I assumed my responsibilities as the Dean of Mississippi College School of Law in Jackson, Mississippi (“MC Law”). Although some “repeat deans” attended this course, the great majority were serving as deans for the first time.

A topic of discussion amongst those deans was the question of how long they planned to serve. Even at this early juncture, some knew that in the not too distant future they would be returning to the faculty to resume teaching. Others took the view that a dean’s position was the one to which they had aspired, and that they planned to remain in the position until retirement. Yet others planned to seek another dean position that was more prominent or more in sync with their personal circumstances. Others hoped to move into central university administration or other prominent positions.<sup>2</sup>

A common question raised in this discussion was “What is the average tenure of a law school dean?” I recall someone offering the figure of seven years in response.

From this New Deans Course and from conferences and workshops sponsored by the Association of American Law Schools and the Section on Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar of the American Bar Association, I became acquainted with long-serving decanal giants. Deans such as Leonard Strickman, Robert Walsh, Rudy Hasl, David Van Zant, Steven Smith, Don LeDuc, Richard Matasar, Brad Toben, and Don Burnett offered wisdom and advice from their perspective of having double-digit years of decanal service.

While the tenure of interim deans was naturally relatively brief, some regular deans also left their positions after fairly short periods to return to the faculty, to move to another deanship, or to follow other callings. These moves caused me to wonder if the average or median tenure of a dean was really seven years.

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1. Television jingle for Winston Super King cigarettes from the 1960s.

\* Dean, Mississippi College School of Law; B.A. Vanderbilt University, J.D. Cornell University. *Biography of Dean Jim Rosenblatt*, MISS. C. SCH. OF LAW, <http://law.mc.edu/faculty-staff/faculty/rosenblatt/> (last visited Mar. 7, 2011).

2. The tenure of one member of our class, Dean Elena Kagan of Harvard Law School, was cut short by appointment as the Solicitor General and later as an Associate Justice on the U.S. Supreme Court.

I thought it might be helpful to construct a simple database that would track the tenure of law school deans. I approached our very able Director of Information Technology to see if this could be done. The director asked if there were other fields that would be relevant so they could be incorporated from the start. I queried some of my fellow deans and some faculty members to see what fields might be of general interest. After extensive code writing, a series of format revisions, and beta tests, we now have the Rosenblatt's Deans Database ("RDD") that is posted on our MC Law website and available to the public at <http://www.law.mc.edu/deans/>.

Our plan was to have a database that would stay current, that would be updated by individual deans, and that would have search capability. The information entered by the deans would populate fields in the database and could be "called out" through premade and custom searches.

#### NAVIGATING THE RDD

Allow me to take you on a tour of the RDD and explain some of its capabilities and uses.

#### *Home Page*<sup>3</sup>

A short narrative introduces the RDD and describes its purpose. Photos of the deans who have served the most number of years as a dean (all law schools), served the longest at their current law school, and served the shortest time as a dean (the newest dean) appear on the home page's right side. Menu buttons located on the top of the page permit the user to access and search for a variety of information about law school deans.

#### *List of Deans (A-Z)*<sup>4</sup>

Clicking on the LIST OF DEANS menu button brings to the screen an alphabetical listing of all law school deans, their email addresses, and their law schools. Clicking on the name of a dean takes visitors to that dean's profile page, which offers a host of information including their total years as a dean, their live email address, a link to their biography or individual web page, language skills, whether they came to the deanship from the faculty, past deanships held, law degrees earned and the school that awarded them, non-law degrees held, past professorships, private practice information, judicial positions, military service, and federal or state government service. Visitors can review the information on this page to get a quick insight into a dean's background and credentials and then examine the dean's biography/profile on his or her school's web site to gain additional information on topics such as scholarship, service, memberships, and teaching expertise. Each dean updates his or her own profile on the RDD and

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3. ROSENBLATT'S DEANS DATABASE, <http://law.mc.edu/deans/> (last visited Mar. 7, 2011).

4. *Listing of All Law School Deans*, ROSENBLATT'S DEANS DATABASE, <http://law.mc.edu/deans/fulllist.php> (last visited Mar. 7, 2011).

can include as much or as little information as he or she desires (though it is my hope that all deans will be willing to provide this background information). A “N/A” entry indicates that the category is not applicable (doesn’t apply) or is not available (data not entered). Clicking on the name of the law school in the third column takes visitors to the profile page for that school (see the following section).

#### *List of Schools (A-Z)*<sup>5</sup>

Clicking on the LIST OF LAW SCHOOLS menu button produces an alphabetized listing of all law schools and their locations. Each school name is a hyperlink to the profile page for that school. Clicking on a school name produces a profile page that provides the name of the parent university, the law school’s web address, phone and fax numbers, and mailing address. The web address is a hyperlink that takes visitors to that law school’s web page.

The data fields on this law school profile page include the listing of the current dean and that dean’s tenure, a listing of previous deans populated by the entries made by the former deans, a listing of deans who attended that law school, and a listing of previous deans that can be populated by the law school administrator.

The last item on the profile page is a listing of the three positions at law schools, in addition to the dean, who “vote” in the annual *US News and World Report*’s Peer Assessment Survey of Law Schools. The completion of this section is purely voluntary, and a number of law schools are likely to leave this blank. However, our school gets perhaps three calls a week from a student worker or someone from the dean’s office of a law school asking us for the names and mailing addresses of these three “voters.” On this page of the RDD, a school administrator can list the names on the profile page and save the agony of responding to these calls. Or, the administrator can indicate that the school chooses not to furnish this information.

A link at the bottom of the law school profile page takes visitors to a page where law school administrators can log in to update the school’s information.

#### *Search*<sup>6</sup>

Clicking on the SEARCH button takes one to a page where the user can employ premade searches or enter custom searches. These searches pull data from the database based on entries made in the various fields.

Premade searches have established search parameters and are available to determine:

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5. *Law School List*, ROSENBLATT’S DEANS DATABASE, <http://law.mc.edu/deans/schoollist.php> (last visited Mar. 7, 2011).

6. *Search the RDD*, ROSENBLATT’S DEANS DATABASE, <http://law.mc.edu/deans/search.php> (last visited Mar. 7, 2011).

- Which deans have the longest service as deans in all their combined deanships;
- The length of time a dean has served in the current deanship;
- A listing of law schools attended by deans with the most commonly attended school listed first (Yale Law School followed by Harvard Law School and Michigan Law School);
- A table that shows the average current tenure of serving deans and the median current tenure of serving deans;
- A listing of schools with the name of the current dean and the dean's email and mailing address;
- Deans listed by last name;
- Law schools sorted by name;
- Former deans sorted by name;
- Schools with interim deans;
- A listing of deans designate who will be assuming decanal positions.

Custom searches allow the user to search for:

- A dean—by name—which would take one to that dean's profile and all the information located therein;
- A former dean—by name—which would take one to that dean's profile;
- A law school—by name—which would take one to the profile for that school and all the information provided at that site;
- A listing of all law schools located in a particular state.

#### *Deans—Update Profile*<sup>7</sup>

The DEANS—UPDATE PROFILE menu button is to be used by deans—not the general public—to update the dean's profile. The site is password protected to ensure that only the dean has the capability to enter data for that dean's profile. Via a personal letter, all deans have been furnished a randomly generated password. The account created for each dean stays with them if they move to another dean position. This allows the dean to add new information to their profile. The dean can enter data in a series of fields that transfers to their profile. A dean could choose to enter data in all applicable fields or choose the fields for which data is furnished.

When someone is appointed to be a dean for the first time, the new dean would use this update page to request an account and a password that would be supplied by an administrator at MC Law. Armed with their personal password, the dean would log in via the DEANS—UPDATE PROFILE button to create the dean's profile by entering data. This newly created profile would be associated

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7. *Deans Profile Update Page*, ROSENBLATT'S DEANS DATABASE, <http://law.mc.edu/deans/login.php> (last visited Mar. 7, 2011).

Spring 2011]

TENURE OF LAW SCHOOL DEAN

671

with the dean's law school and would populate data fields in the school's profile as well as the dean's profile.

Former deans who have not previously completed a profile also can use this update page to request a password and create their profile. The information they enter would populate a "former deans" section of a law school's profile as well as a separate listing of former deans.

A dean who moves to a new law school would keep and use the original password provided. The dean would simply log in using the former email address and the password, indicate that the former school was not the current school, and list the new school and the new email address. Those entries would populate and update information at the former school (showing the finite tenure there) and information at the new school (the inception date of the dean's tenure). The rest of the dean's profile information would carry over to the new law school. For future updates, the dean would log in with the current email address and the personal password.

#### *Schools—Update Profile*<sup>8</sup>

A law school administrator would use the SCHOOLS—UPDATE PROFILE button to log in to update administrative information about the law school. While this information is not as sensitive or as individualized as the information for the dean's profile, we wanted to ensure that access was secure in order to update administrative information. A separate password is used to enter the site that contains a series of boxes the administrator can use to enter data. This data collects on the law school's profile page. Via personal letter, all law school deans have been provided a randomly generated password to be used by a member of the law school administration to update the law school's data. The dean can choose whether that update function is to be accomplished by an administrator in the dean's suite, by a public relations official, or by some other administrator. Our database administrator at MC Law is always prepared to provide the password if the letter supplying the password has been misplaced.

#### CONCLUSION

I hope the RDD will prove useful in a variety of ways. I can see it being employed by members of a dean search committee, by those doing research on law school deans, by university administrators, by law students, or by members of the public. Perhaps even a current or former dean might glance at it from time to time to see where that dean "stands in the order."

The success and currency of the RDD depend on law school deans entering and updating their information and on the law school administrator keeping current the information about the law school. I ask for the assistance and cooperation of my colleagues in that regard.

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8. *Schools Profile Update Page*, ROSENBLATT'S DEANS DATABASE, <http://law.mc.edu/deans/schoollogin.php> (last visited Mar. 7, 2011).

I am open to suggestions as to how the RDD can be improved or what data fields or searches we could add.

The web site does not have sufficient data at this time to establish the average tenure of a law school dean. It does show how long deans who are currently serving have been in their office. As deans retire and their tenure is recorded and as former deans enter their information, meaningful data will be available to show the average tenure of a law school dean. Though my initial question as to the tenure of a law school dean has not been answered, one can look at the length of service of deans currently serving to gauge how long they are remaining in office.

Now I will concentrate on making every one of my days as a dean productive and beneficial for our law school, for our students, and for the legal community. How you make it long is more important than how long you make it!