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LESSONS LEARNED BY A NEW DEAN

*Jim Rosenblatt**

THE account of my first year as dean of the Mississippi College School of Law in no way should focus on me as an individual, for my life and my decanal endeavors were inextricably woven into the life of the law school. The account of my first year as a “new dean” must, therefore, be a recounting of the events and activities of the law school in the academic year 2003-2004. Through this brief account, I shall share the story of the law school from my perspective and along the way recount the lessons I have learned and the nuggets of experience I have acquired in the event they may be of interest to other new deans who enter this noble profession in a similar manner.

Though I had taught lawyers at the post-graduate level for three years at the Army’s Judge Advocate General’s School in Charlottesville, Virginia, I truly was an “outside” candidate for the position of dean at the law school in downtown Jackson, Mississippi. I, like so many others, had at times dreamed of teaching law, but had set that dream aside. My background and experience did not lend themselves to securing a teaching position in this very competitive environment. However, I had led a number of large legal offices and had served as the chief operating officer of the Army’s worldwide claims organization. In retrospect, this leadership experience served me as well as any other preparation for my decanal duties. **Lesson Learned: Don’t discount your life experiences, for they may fit into someone else’s plan.**

My opportunity to become the dean of the Mississippi Law School was providentially provided. With my retirement from the Judge Advocate General’s Corps some six months distant, I received a call in March 2003 from my brother Steve who is the managing partner of the Butler, Snow law firm in Jackson. Steve, through his channels, had heard there was a dean search ongoing and thought it might be a good fit for me. I checked with my wife Lauren and our four boys to see if they supported my application and then threw my hat in the ring. That night I prepared a resume and cover letter and sent them overnight to the chair of the search committee. A campus visit and an offer shortly followed. This opportunity became available through the actions of others and was not even in my contemplation following my own research and job search. **Lesson Learned: It is important that others be involved in your work search and assist in making you aware of opportunities.**

During this search process I sought the counsel of the former dean Al Harvey and other friends in legal education including Jeffrey Brauch at Regent, Walt Huffman at Texas Tech, Gerry St. Amand at Northern Kentucky, and the late Tim Heinsz at Missouri—all deans or former deans—and Bob Hillman, a professor at Cornell. Bill Suter, a longtime mentor and the Clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court, offered encouragement and advice. The collective counsel of this group was most valuable

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and caused me to focus on issues and considerations that were crucial to my application and to my integration into the law school and the decanal community. **Lesson Learned: Those who have walked in your shoes have helpful advice and can assist you in avoiding pitfalls.**

With a date certain to begin my association with the law school in August 2003, I had an opportunity in the intervening three months to begin my preparations and to see what lay in the road ahead. This time provided the opportunity to call on the Mississippi congressional delegation in Washington, D.C., attend the annual Mississippi Bar meeting in Florida, participate in an ABA accreditation meeting in San Diego, and make three trips to Jackson to visit with officials at Mississippi College, at the law school, and in the legal community. The opportunity to engage in these discussions before starting the job proved to be very valuable in learning about the law school and in seeking the counsel of varied communities. **Lesson Learned: There are many constituencies revolving around a law school that need to be engaged and involved in the affairs of the law school.**

The most valuable portion of my preparation came at the hands of the American Bar Association's New Dean's Course in Jackson Hole, Wyoming at the end of May 2003. I was fortunate to be able to attend along with Thorne Butler, our newly hired director of development. We shared a lakeside cabin and commuted together to the sessions and activities. This time allowed us to get to know each other and to discuss development plans for the law school. Though relatively new in the position, Thorne was able to share valuable background with me derived from his first months on the job. After the joint development/dean presentations and sessions, Thorne and I would compare notes and sort out the issues as we saw them. **Lesson Learned: The director of development is such a key member of the law school team that the dean and the director need to understand and know each other and have an understanding of the development philosophy of the law school and appreciate what role each plays.**

At this ABA conference, fellow deans guided us through discussions and shared insights and experiences. The course structure led us through the full range of decanal operations and employed a combination of practical exercises, discussion groups, and podium presentations. My notes from this course proved invaluable and remained close by my desk during my first year. They proved to be helpful references that allowed me to consider in greater depth the various aspects of situations I encountered. Every session produced at least three pearls of wisdom, helpful hints, or thoughtful points. I employed many of the practical suggestions from the start. An extremely valuable portion of the course was the guidance from the "one-year deans" who had just completed the first year in the position. David Van Zandt of Northwestern was most generous, not only in sharing advice, but in outlining the philosophical basis for the position he took. **Lesson Learned: This ABA New Dean's Course is indispensable in being an effective dean and should be attended at the first opportunity!**

I was literally taken aback at the quality of the deans I encountered at the ABA New Dean's Conference. Though we were on the shores of Jackson Lake, it felt remarkably like Lake Wobegon, for all the deans I met were strong, good looking, and above average! Frankly, I was concerned how this group of outstanding scholars and leaders would deal with the dean of a small, private, Southern law

school. It was with open arms and genuine collegial respect that I was brought into the fold. Rankings and tiers held no sway in this group that was so collegial and helpful. This group of women and men felt a special bond as leaders of law schools that I could sense and that enveloped me. Subsequent gatherings of deans at the AALS Conference and the ABA Mid-Year Conference brought home how special this group is—and how helpful its support can be. **Lesson Learned: The collegial bond that binds together the community of law school deans is one of the great delights of the position.**

Wise advisors had counseled me that when I showed up for work on the first day, not to plunk myself down at my desk and start reading all the mail and law school magazines that had piled up awaiting my arrival. There would always be time for this work. Rather, the advice was to be visible in the law school, walking around, meeting the folks, and chatting with them. Thus, at each stop I asked for their advice and solicited their input about the law school. This was designed to ease the anxieties of those for whom a new dean can be a concern simply because of the unknown and because of the potential change a new leader might produce in their work environment. **Lessons Learned: The law school is made up of people, not paper. People make the law school work. A new dean needs to help the people of the law school make the transition to the new dean. Every person in the law school is important to its operation and needs to believe in the importance of his or her contribution.**

Of invaluable assistance to me in formulating a plan of operation for the first year was an opportunity to travel to an alumni event with our associate dean Phillip McIntosh. During the car ride over and back to Monroe, Louisiana, Dean McIntosh was able to share with me the culture, history, strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of the law school. This uninterrupted time away from the law school gave me the opportunity to ask questions, clarify issues, and get a feel for Dean McIntosh's approach to working with the faculty. This foundational base of information, thought, and recommendations shaped the operational plan I was constructing for the first year and established a trusting working relationship with this key law school leader. **Lesson Learned: The associate dean for academic affairs (or like position) is crucial for the successful operation of any law school. A "partnership" between the dean and the associate dean is essential for the smooth operation of a law school. The dean needs to invest in this relationship.**

Equally valuable in the formulation of an operational plan was a faculty retreat held one week after I arrived, the week before orientation. The idea for the retreat—like so many others—came from the New Dean's Conference. In structuring the retreat, I fell back on our discussion of whom to include, who best to facilitate the retreat, how to set an agenda, the pace of the retreat, where to hold it, what setting to establish, and what tangible "take-aways" to expect. I realized there were not set answers, but by thinking through these issues in light of our particular situation, we were able to come up with a retreat that produced positive results. One suggestion proved to be invaluable—serve food! Our faculty thoroughly enjoyed dining together. A catered lunch and munchies throughout the day sent a positive signal (and set the precedent for law school supplied food at all future faculty gatherings!). **Lesson Learned: There are no pat answers or cookie cutter approaches as to how to conduct retreats or other law school**

events, but a careful consideration of the issues and recognition of the local setting will produce the right answer.

My approach in the faculty retreat was to listen. We had developed an agenda and a list of discussion areas that provided some structure and flow to the day, but I wanted to “hear out” our faculty. As in any setting, there were some concerns that they were more than ready to share with me. Along the way I got an appreciation for the historical development associated with some of these issues. Not only did this retreat provide an opportunity for some faculty members to get issues off their chests, but it gave me a feel for what was important to our faculty and what factors they believed were detracting from their teaching and scholarship. I took my own notes and also had our administrative officer take notes. At the conclusion of each issue, I attempted to get an idea of who should take the lead in addressing the issue and what might be the initial step toward its resolution. One of the most helpful portions of the retreat resulted from a suggestion from Mark Gordon (University of Detroit Mercy School of Law) at the New Dean’s Conference. During our retreat’s working luncheon, we had a light discussion of “Ten Easy Things the Dean Could Do to Make Your Life Better.” Some of the concerns revealed in this session were small and simple, but had been irritating for some for many months. In fact, some were amenable to quick fixes that cost very little money or time. For example, we opened the front doors of the law school thirty minutes earlier each day at the suggestion of one of our faculty. Our faculty noticed every minor improvement. **Lessons Learned: Everyone has issues, concerns, suggestions, and good ideas. There needs to be a mechanism to get them out and to get them resolved.**

In these first few weeks, I refrained from announcing some grand plan of operations or strategic focus or abrupt change in how we worked. I knew that good teaching was taking place in the classroom and that our students were being well supported, counseled, and cared for. My style was to establish a team and work quietly to produce results that would combine to create an energy and sense of progress without great fanfare. However, I did select for my own attention six initiatives to guide my leadership efforts, help me prioritize my work and my time, and allocate resources. **Lesson Learned: A plan—whether announced or worked quietly—provides the necessary blueprint for moving an organization forward in a coordinated manner.**

The six initiatives were:

- ▶ **Forge a close relationship with our parent university.** The law school occupies a distinctly urban campus in the state capital—some fourteen miles distant from the more pastoral setting of the college. The faculties had not been particularly close. A series of physical plant improvements at the college had not touched the law school for a number of years. I looked for ways that we could become more a part of the college and its life. The timing was right for seeking a closer bond, for a dynamic new university president Dr. Royce had recently taken office, and a vice-president for academics Dr. Howard was also newly installed. Financial affairs for the college were ably under the direction of Dr. Roberts who had guided the college through a challenging period as the interim president. My fellow deans in the other schools of the university welcomed me and appreciated the interest I showed in their schools. Our

faculty members and I made it a point to attend the meetings of the college, cheer at sporting events, serve as speakers at programs, and participate in a range of activities sponsored by the college. We did this in a manner that did not consume inordinate amounts of time or detract from teaching. These relationships have brought our law school closer to the college in a delightful manner. Our goal has been to demonstrate how our law school can be a supportive part of the university system. **Lesson Learned: The university and the law school need each other. A good relationship inures to the benefit of both. Law schools are sometimes regarded as a bit different in a university setting, requiring some public relations work by those in the law school.**

- ▶ **Support our faculty in their teaching and scholarship.** Our faculty is such an important part of our law school that I wanted to make certain that we did everything realistically possible to make their life easier, to provide them the tools they needed, and to take away from them non-essential tasks that others could do. We were able to purchase new faculty computers and printers that eliminated the frustration of working with older equipment. Faculty members specified whether they wanted a laptop or a desktop. We established faculty accounts in a set amount based on their position that permitted them to plan and budget and eliminated the need to have to “ask” for travel, books, or teaching assistants. We approved a record number of research grants this year. Our new classrooms provide the latest in technology to permit teaching presentations in a variety of modes. We continue to seek ways that we can improve the lives of our faculty and permit them to be better teachers and scholars. **Lesson Learned: A faculty that is supported well and that feels appreciated will be more effective.**
- ▶ **Improve the physical plant and create a law school campus.** Our physical plant was old and in need of expansion. Just prior to my arrival Interim Dean Lee had broken ground on a classroom addition to the law school, but it was apparent that the law school still needed a student center housing a bookstore, a food service facility, and a large auditorium-like room in which we could seat an entire entering class. It was exciting to see the faculty, development staff, students, and officials from the college work with the architect to begin the planning of this building, which should break ground in the fall of 2004. When a large parking lot across the street from the law school became available, the college and the board of trustees teamed to purchase the lot to provide every student with a parking space immediately proximate to the law school. These major additions coupled with a series of cosmetic steps led by our building superintendent dramatically changed our campus. It is amazing how the addition of a few flowers and some landscaping can improve the appearance of a law school. **Lesson Learned: An attractive law school physical plant provides a better environment for teaching, learning, and bonding and promotes excellence. An unattractive feature—if ignored—quickly becomes accepted as people get used to it. One needs to view the physical plant constantly through the eyes of an outsider.**

- ▶ **Improve financial operations.** In past years the law school budget was intertwined with the budget of the college. This situation did not provide for clear planning and did not encourage the generation of revenues. Following a heartening discussion of finances, the college provided us with a semi-autonomous budget for our first year that will evolve into an autonomous budget for this next year. We agreed upon overhead rates for support from the college and a principal payment with all other revenues benefiting the law school. This allows us to plan and to rev up programs like Continuing Legal Education. This plan has permitted the hiring of additional staff, which has immeasurably added to the effectiveness of the law school. **Lessons Learned: Financial operations are so important to a successful law school operation. The dean needs to be well versed in the financial operation of the law school and to have a working knowledge of the budget and its components in order to deal with university financial officials and to plan for law school operations.**

- ▶ **Forge a relationship between alumni and the law school.** Our alumni program provided an opportunity to forge some closer ties. I believe there is a natural “hunger” to be connected with one’s law school. As a regional law school, the large majority of our graduates are located relatively close. This proximity afforded us the opportunity to set in motion an annual reunion program regardless of class year and enabled us to travel to alumni gatherings in Mississippi and the surrounding states. I love to dash off brief notes to our graduates when notable events occur in their lives, and I use electronic methods to communicate with our graduates about every third week. We bring our graduates back to the law school for bar review courses, CLE offerings, moot court judging, and any other excuse we can think of. Our goal is to create a familiar and comfortable relationship with our graduates and not just a once-every-five-year relationship. **Lesson Learned: If the alumni have a positive relationship with the law school, they can help in innumerable ways. However, every good alumni program begins by treating the law student right during the three years of attendance and then building on that base.**

- ▶ **Increase the awareness of the law school.** I was very impressed by the dedication of our faculty to our students and to their teaching. Our students passed the bar and got jobs in impressive numbers. Our graduates hold numerous governmental and judicial offices and are successful practicing attorneys. However, many in the legal community were not familiar with our law school or what it was doing. It was my goal to take the bushel off our light and let it shine. A rejuvenated public relations and media program started to get our name out before the public. We completely revamped our web site, we had signs for the law school installed on the interstate highway and in the city, and we accepted every opportunity to speak, moderate, present, and comment. While we have no precise way of measuring public and professional awareness, we are confident that we are becoming more known and that our story of a principled legal education in a caring and supportive environment is getting out. **Lesson Learned: Public image is crucial for recruitment, placement, and development. The goal is not to create a favorable false impression, but**

rather to tell the story of the law school's increasing excellence and to ensure that the story is being heard!

My first year has been an exhilarating experience. Dean Mark Gordon, in our last session at the New Dean's Conference, noted that the thing he liked best about being a law school dean was that it "allowed him to use every muscle in his body." After a year, I now have a full appreciation for Mark's insight. The broad range of issues a dean faces each day, with every day offering different and unpredictable challenges, truly allows a dean to use every bit of imagination, experience, energy, insight, care, love, and resolve resident in the human body. To have a complete intersection of one's vocation and avocation is to live in a grand way. I am grateful for this opportunity to be associated with Mississippi College and its law school, to be a contributor to the greater legal community, and to share the experience of my first year as a law school dean in this article.

