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# A Prof Who Linked Legal Education to the Legal Profession

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Ethical **CONSIDERATIONS**

# A Prof Who Linked Legal Education to the Legal Profession



Lawrence K. Hellman

By Lawrence K. Hellman©  
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After a teaching career that began in the 1960s, Richard Coulson retired from full-time teaching at OCU last year. I first met Richard in the spring of 1977 when I visited OCU as a candidate to join the faculty. Although we were near contemporaries in age, it seemed to me that Richard was much senior to me. And he was – in experience, in wisdom, in foresight. It was immediately apparent to me that he was a critical player in the institution I was seeking to join. It seemed almost as if he had always been a part of the law school and had assumed the responsibility of nurturing it like a parent raising a child.

Remarkably, during the course of his 30-plus years on the faculty, Richard taught no fewer than 28 different courses in the curriculum – ranging from the highly theoretical (e.g., jurisprudence and legal history) to the fundamental (e.g., contracts, remedies, and conflicts) to the emphatically practical (e.g., bankruptcy and scientific evidence).

It speaks volumes about Richard's dedication to the fundamental mission of legal education that the last course he added to his repertoire – one he chose as a new preparation in his final year of full-time teaching – was the required course we call "the legal profession." At other law schools, this course is sometimes titled "professional responsibility," or "legal ethics," or "the law governing lawyers." It is designed to help law students to understand what their responsibilities will be upon graduation and to assist the students to develop what an influential Carnegie Foundation study<sup>i</sup> of legal education recently described as a "sense of professional identity and purpose." Its aim is to prepare law students to fulfill their professional responsibilities while living out gratifying careers. Richard wanted this course to be one of his last memories of a career in legal education.

Being the most senior member of the faculty,<sup>ii</sup> Richard "owned" the law school's history like no one else on the faculty could. He had been a student at the law school from 1965 to 1968, when it was still exclusively a part-time, evening program taught by a predominantly part-time faculty, in rather dismal facilities. He knew those part-time professors, and he learned much from them. He joined the faculty in 1969, only a year after his graduation, thus becoming one of the first full-time professors in the school's history. Shortly thereafter, he became assistant dean, and then acting dean.

In his earliest years on the faculty, he was involved in some momentous, history-changing decisions, such as the move to open a full-time, day program and the shift

of faculty and student recruitment from the local scene to the national market. Soon, at the age of 32, he was named dean. He set out determinedly to build the law school's quality and academic reputation. When the university was unable to provide the resources necessary to move forward at a pace he considered acceptable, Richard resigned the deanship in protest. Importantly, however, he remained on the faculty and asserted his considerable influence toward hastening the day when the university would make advancement of the law school an institutional priority.

While he left the deanship after only a brief period in office, and this was still very early in his career, he had become so closely connected with the institution that he could not abandon it. He saw its potential and its importance. He was determined to make the building of the law school his life's work. He chose to do this by constantly encouraging each successive dean to push ahead with improvements.

Richard knew what a modern, robust law school should be and should offer its students. He steadily supported innovations that resulted in a growing reputation for the school and its graduates. He saw the full-time faculty grow from a mere handful to 35 and the law library grow from 15,000 volumes to more than 320,000. He saw OCU LAW transform itself into a national law school that attracts students from throughout the United States and beyond and has placed graduates in every state and several foreign nations. When, in 2003, OCU LAW achieved its long-sought-after goal of gaining membership in the Association of American Law Schools, there was no one prouder than Richard Coulson.

Richard always was aware of emerging trends in legal education. He championed greater emphasis in the curriculum on interdisciplinary, international, and comparative concepts. He believed in experiential learning. In the mid-1980s, he took a self-imposed five years hiatus from teaching in order to gain experience in private practice – so that he could be a more complete professor. In taking this step, he demonstrated that he understood what the legal academy is only now fully appreciating in the wake of the 2007 Carnegie Foundation report: legal educators must prepare their students to practice law, not simply to *know* the law.<sup>iii</sup>

Yes, educating lawyers requires that law schools do more than lead their students in their development of analytical and reasoning skills and the acquisition of substantive knowledge. Equally important, law schools must assist their students to develop practical skills and a sense of professional identity and purpose that will allow them to use their knowledge and analytical skills

constructively and in keeping with the high values of the legal profession.<sup>iv</sup> Perhaps without articulating it at the time, Richard had taken his five-year foray into practice in the mid-1980s to put himself in a better position to integrate what the Carnegie Report describes as the "cognitive, practical, and socio-ethical" objectives of legal education for his students. Twenty years later, as he was ending his teaching career, law schools across the country were altering their curricula in order to do what Richard Coulson had been doing for decades.<sup>v</sup>

Shortly after he retired, Richard reflected on the relationship between law schools and the legal profession. In an address at an alumni luncheon in November 2008, he observed: "The law schools must not stand in isolation from the practicing bar. This is necessary to secure the public's acceptance of the rule of law itself as the primary means of peacefully resolving issues in our society."

And so, even in retirement, Richard Coulson is still determined to maintain the link between legal education and the legal profession.

*NOTE: This essay is an edited version of Dean Hellman's tribute to Richard Coulson that will appear along with other tributes in a forthcoming issue of the Oklahoma City University Law Review.*

<sup>i</sup> WILLIAM SULLIVAN, ET AL, EDUCATING LAWYERS: PREPARATION FOR THE PROFESSION OF LAW (2007) (hereinafter EDUCATING LAWYERS).

<sup>ii</sup> Because Richard left the faculty for private practice from 1983 to 1988, at the time of Richard's retirement, Von Creel was more senior than Richard in terms of continuous service to OCU. However, Richard's time on the faculty had begun before Von's, so that Richard's institutional memory reached further back into the history of the law school than Von's.

<sup>iii</sup> EDUCATING LAWYERS at 12-14, 194-97.

<sup>iv</sup> *Id.*

<sup>v</sup> See e.g. Vesna Jaksic, *School's Third-year Program Overhauled to Teach Practice of Law*, National Law Journal, Mar. 13, 2008, <http://law.com/jsp/nlj/PubArticlePrinterFriendlyNLJ.jsp?id=90...>; [HTTP://LAW.WLU.EDU/THIRDPYEAR/](http://LAW.WLU.EDU/THIRDPYEAR/) (Washington & Lee University curriculum announcement); [HTTP://WWW.LAW.NORTHWESTERN.EDU/NEWS/NEWSDISPLAY.CFM?ID=191](http://WWW.LAW.NORTHWESTERN.EDU/NEWS/NEWSDISPLAY.CFM?ID=191) (Northwestern University curriculum announcement); <http://www.bc.edu/schools/law/newssevents/2008/arch/ive/31408-2.html> (Boston College curriculum announcement); <http://www.law.stanford.edu/news/pr/47/A%20%20C3%A2%E2%82%AC%C5%933D%C3%A2%E2%82%AC%C2%9D%20Stanford%20Law%2020Law%20School%20Announces%20New%20Model%20for%20Legal%20Education/> (Stanford University curriculum announcement); Michelle Lore, *Balancing Law School Curricula: Report on State of Legal Education Causes Stir Among Academics*, Minnesota Lawyer, Oct. 29, 2007, 2007 WLNR 21464305.

## EVENTS & SEMINARS

### OCBA EVENTS

Feb. 7-13, 2009

30th Annual Aspen  
CLE Seminar & Ski Trip,  
Aspen, Colorado

April 24-26, 2009

Bench & Bar Conference,  
Quartz Mountain Resort

April 30, 2009

Ask A Lawyer Program,  
OETA,  
8:45 a.m. - 9 p.m.

May 1, 2009

Law Day Luncheon

June 19, 2009

Annual Awards Luncheon

