

Commentary

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This segment is going to focus on four questions. The first question is, “Why become a dean?” I am dean of one law school, which is a law school in two locations, in two different states. The Wilmington, Delaware Campus of Widener has about 1,200 students, including a 200-student legal education institute, which is an undergraduate program in law. On that campus, I have an undergraduate program, a regular J.D. program, postgraduate programs, and a branch of the National Judicial College. Additionally, 100 miles away at the Harrisburg campus, there are another 400 students, primarily in the large J.D. program.

I am now in my fourth career in thirty-five years. It has been an interesting journey for me. I have been mentoring all my life. I have also had the fortune and blessings of being attached to people who have given me great advice, though not necessarily for deanship. I started getting and giving advice very early on with my own family. I am the eldest sister of four boys, and that was great preparation in terms of mentoring. There are also people in this room who have mentored me; that is very important to me.

My first point is to make sure you have a mentor. Do not try to do this on your own. There is someone who I refer to as the dean of deans (minority deans particularly), and that person is LeRoy Pernell.¹ LeRoy and Professor David Williams,² the current vice president at Vanderbilt, taught some of my classes in law school. One day they each called me separately and said, “You know, you ought to think about teaching law.” My reaction was very similar to the reaction you have already heard: “You have got to be out of your mind. If I ever get out of this building, I am not going into another law school building.” Prophecy is a gift I do not have, so you can imagine where I ended up. I think this was largely

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1. Dean LeRoy Pernell is dean at Florida A&M University College of Law and the former dean of Northern Illinois University College of Law.

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because Leroy and David proposed the idea that I become part of the academy very early on, and it stuck with me. I did not do it right away; I did other things. But I will not take time to say how I wound up back in the academy; the main point is that I did end up back here.

I could not be more different from my predecessor as the dean of the Wilmington, Delaware institution.³ He is a male, and I am a female; he is tall, and I am short. He is somewhat reserved, and I am the definition of an extrovert, what you might call a type-A personality. In short, I am a very different kind of person, and my life experience is very different from my predecessor.

This brings me to the second topic I would like to discuss, which is why I became a dean and why you might also want to become one. I came into academy after doing several other things that tested my leadership skills in very different ways. You may wonder why I decided to become a dean after having built administrative skills in so many other contexts. One reason to become a dean is if you are sick and tired of being sick and tired; if you want to see things done a particular way, then do it. That is one piece of advice that I have. If you have proven leadership skills that you want to stretch, you can apply them as a dean. Even if you have proven leadership skills in other fields, what I have found after having become dean is that those skills can be utilized and varied as a dean. Not everyone brings the same skill set to the table. Some people are just wonders at budgets. I am decent with budgets, but you can hire people to do that. Other people are great communicators— you just have to make sure they know what they are doing.

Law schools today are not the law schools that we attended. They are not even the law schools of five years ago. With all of the external events that deans have to do today, deans are like politicians. I came out of politics before I went into the academy. Being a dean, however, reminds me so much of being back in the governor's office again. Even when I am at the grocery store, when I am tempted to be a little testy with a checkout clerk, I have to remember that I am the dean and I represent an entire community of people.

If you have aspirations for other positions in higher education, particularly something like provost or president, a deanship can prepare you for those types of roles. In fact, my president asked me when I came in whether I had any aspirations to be president. I do not know whether he was asking about his job or not. At the time I did not, and still do not,

3. Dean Douglas Ray preceded Dean Ammons at Widener and is now dean of University of Toledo College of Law.

want his job, but you never know what life will bring you. I am not announcing any particular interest in presidencies because it is a much harder job than being dean. Nevertheless, you never know where the path may lead on your journey.

If you are not afraid of risk, and ambiguity does not rattle you, then you can become a dean. Generally, I am not the type of person to get rattled, but there are days where it happens. For example, I walked into the academy in early September at nine o'clock in the morning and people were very upset because, I learned, a beloved faculty member had passed away. At two o'clock that day, campus security called and told me that one of our students had committed suicide. That day rattled me, but I still had to go into crisis mode and do the necessary things. On a very large campus, those necessary things involved thinking about the media and state patrol, amongst other things. That is not how I had planned to start my week the day after Labor Day, but you never know what the day will bring when you walk in the door. You have to be centered in the knowledge that, whatever happens, you have the skill set to handle it. You would not be dean if you did not have those skills.

Additionally, if you have a thirst for institution building, this kind of job may be for you. If you enjoy recruiting and inspiring talented people—including students, alums, and faculty—and turning them loose to see what they can do, then you will enjoy doing this kind of job.

You must also have vision and some sense of what you can do with the institution. You need awareness of why you are there at this particular point in the life of the institution. You also have to answer two questions. First, what do you bring that is going to be different and that will enhance the institution? And second, what are the right reasons to step forward? On my list, one of the right reasons to step forward is if you have sufficient administrative experiences, including committees, associate deanships, boards, and ABA visits (particularly for minority candidates). You do not get any benefit of the doubt, so in many ways you must be overqualified before you are considered qualified.

So if you can, make yourself available for administrative experience. Take a turn in the associate dean's office, if possible. It is not a prerequisite, but there are certain things that you will only learn as a result of being in the associate deanship's chair. One of the sad things is that you will learn all sorts of things that you never wanted to know about your colleagues. You will have some days where you will have to say, "That is really too much information." But you will need to know the information because you will find that the same qualities in people (like temperaments and personality traits) tend to follow you, and will be

qualities you will have to deal with during your deanship. For example, when I see people I say, "Okay, he or she is . . .," and I will have to remember what happened in the past when I have dealt with a similar type of person in a similar situation.

You should get some kind of administrative experience before you become dean, either by becoming an associate dean or by being a member on a board such as the ABA⁴ or SALT.⁵ I do not recommend just coming straight out of the faculty into an administrative position as dean. Not these days. You could do that many years ago because back then, primarily you just needed to be a scholar and to lead the faculty. But law schools have changed too much. We are in the midst of a transition; we are trying to figure out what we are going to be when we grow up. Notions of skills training, curriculum, and the way lawyers should be prepared are in flux right now. As a result of this particular age of transition, administrative experience helps greatly.

If you have energy for change, it is the right reason to step forward. If you are tired, do not take this job. You do not know the meaning of tired until you take a dean's chair. Being dean over two campuses, tired is no longer in my vocabulary. You are not allowed to be tired. You need energy if you want to do this. If you really enjoy serving through leadership, then step forward, because that is what we do. It is heady to be called dean. It is nice to have a seat at the front table, to be recognized by the bench, the bar, and the alumni, but actually, at the end of the day, what we as deans are doing are serving through leadership. You are serving each of these constituencies, and they will remind you of that after they give you the nice seat at the table. So if you do not mind serving, if you have a servant's heart, it will work.

After this discussion, if you are still considering a deanship, the third topic I would like to discuss are some of the rewards and challenges of a dean's job. Specifically, what rewards and challenges come with your ability to be both a middle manager and also a CEO? And, how can you be a middle manager and a CEO at the same time? A middle manager is a role that can have a few different meanings. If you are in a university system, you are the dean, but there is usually somebody else above you: either the provost or the president. If you are in an independent school, you have a board, but you are still CEO of your particular unit. So, deans have kind of a schizophrenic role: the faculty think that they hired you, while the president and the provost know that they are

4. American Bar Association, <http://www.abanet.org/> (last visited Apr. 1, 2008).

5. Society of American Law Teachers, <http://www.saltlaw.org/> (last visited Apr. 1, 2008).

actually the ones who hired you. Accordingly, your role will change depending upon to whom you are talking in any given day.

A reward of being dean is seeing a concept of yours become a reality. It is wonderful to speak of an idea and watch it come into being. Seeing faculty energize and move forward, and recognizing what it took to get there. Sometimes faculty will be so grateful for even the simplest things. For example, I had a meeting with one of my institutes (we have four) the other day where I had the faculty members tell me what it was that they actually do. At the end of that day, one particular senior faculty member came to me and said, “You know, this is the first time in the twenty-six years that I have been here that the dean has called us together and really, really rolled up her sleeves to talk about issues like we are all adults.” For me it was an obvious thing to do, but you will be surprised of the simple things you can do that will get you good points.

There is nothing like seeing rewards, seeing the faculty energize and move forward, and alumni come alive when you reconnect them to an institution. Alumni want to be connected to the institutions and somebody has to reach out to them, particularly when you know you need to ask for their financial support later on. If you like doing that, you will have a great time. Having your voice really count among numerous constituencies—the bench, the bar, the people of minority status, and the greater community—is time intensive and pulls you away. However, as a dean you have to do those things more often because every group wants a piece of your time, and you will have to be on every committee. People expect that of you when you are dean; deans must do it.

These rewards come with the challenges of being a middle manager. If you are impatient like I am, then the bureaucracy of organizations can drive you crazy. On the other hand, a perk of being a dean is that, while you are waiting for something on this end to move, you can be over here doing some other things because things move slowly. However, you must be aware that you cannot do everything at once; I would not recommend it. No matter how many good ideas you have, there are only so many hours in a day. You have limited resources and you cannot have an administration that is structured like an octopus. You cannot have so many hands moving in so many directions that none of them is under control.

Lastly, keeping the faculty and the students focused in any given day is both a reward and a challenge. I know many of you saw that article in the *Wall Street Journal* about how students should not go to law

school because it is expensive and increasingly difficult to obtain a job.⁶ Just a week ago, I was talking to students about the job market. The statistic I have is that 95% of last year's graduates are employed. Somebody is working if 95% are employed. This is an example of the difficulty of keeping people focused: the focuses of the students and the faculty change daily, and it can be exhausting because, like the article in the *Wall Street Journal*, you never know what is going to hit you and how it is going to come. What you do know is that everybody wants a piece of you—your knowledge, your direction, and your wisdom. And everybody seeks you out, even when you do not have the slightest clue as to what issues they are talking about.

The final thought I would like to leave you with is this: I am of the belief that there is a time and a season for everything. The deanship that I currently have came as a result of having been in the market twice. The first time I failed, and you know what? Failure is underrated. You can always learn something from failure. You must ask yourself, "What is it that I could have done, should have done, and did not do?" It could be that this is not where you need to be. That was my thought my first time around; for me, that first experience was not the right time. Yet, it was still beneficial to my own personal growth and development because I had another year to wrestle with tough problems and to open up the market in ways it had not been open the year before. So, I am grateful for failure the first time around. I learned from it. Going forward, I recommend that you look for a proper fit. Do not accept a position just to be a dean. Make sure you do your homework. Know who the president and provost are and know their backgrounds. Know why that last dean left to the extent that you can find out. Know when you are ready.

For years, while I was a part of the women's database at Georgetown, I would get deanship offers that I would always decline. The reason why I said "no" was that, when I first started getting calls, I believed I was still an associate professor of law. I was not ready. I had done other administrative work elsewhere, but not in the law school. I was not sure I was going to do it. I was coaxed into it by one of the former deans and I also had the deans wait. I told them that I was not ready to come down until I became a full professor. As a minority person, I knew that I needed to check experiences off my list. I wanted to be sure that there was absolutely nothing that could be said about my background. I am not saying that everybody must do that, but for me, that is why I waited

6. Amir Efrati, *Hard Case: Job Market Wanes for U.S. Lawyers*, WALL ST. J., Sept. 24, 2007, at A1.

even though my name was in the database. So, even though you can put your name in the database, you do not have to accept something right away.

I have just two last things about determining when the time is right. It is time to go get out there and do something else when you have obtained enough experience and have seen enough other perspectives that you feel ready to move on. Additionally, it is the right time when your only agenda is to help the institution grow. What does it mean to have an agenda? You must have a program; if you do not have a program, you are not going to get the job. When the job is not about you, then you can focus on why you are really there, and you will have a lot more fun doing this kind of job. That is when it will be the right time.