



Oklahoma City University School of Law

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Richard E. Coulson: The Indispensable Link Between The Past And The Future Of A Developing Law School

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TRIBUTES

RICHARD E. COULSON: THE INDISPENSABLE LINK BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE FUTURE OF A DEVELOPING LAW SCHOOL

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My first memory of Richard E. Coulson dates back to the spring of 1977 when I visited OCU as a candidate to join the faculty. Although he was my contemporary in age (and we were both pretty young), it seemed to me that Richard was much senior to me. And he *was*—in experience, in wisdom, and in foresight. It was immediately apparent to me that he was a critical player in the institution. It seemed 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.

His paternalistic disposition toward the law school was neither subtle nor entirely selfless. As we walked together on a tour of the school, he wasted no time in letting me know that (a) he was aware that my academic interest was in the field of antitrust law and (b) the antitrust course was *his*. End of discussion. Fortunately for me, Richard's monopolistic position in antitrust law at OCU allowed me to develop in some other substantive areas after I joined the faculty. Never mind that Richard's endlessly shifting interests led him to abandon antitrust a few

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years after I had arrived. The course was Richard's to have and to hold or to set free at his discretion.

Remarkably, during the course of his thirty-plus years on the faculty, Richard taught no fewer than twenty-eight 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," "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 of legal education describes as a sense of professional identity and purpose¹—so that they will fulfill their responsibilities while living out gratifying careers. Richard wanted this course to be one of his last memories of a career in legal education.

Ironically, the legal profession course that he picked up in his last year was one that I had focused on when, thirty years earlier, Richard had claimed ownership of the antitrust law course. Was he perhaps underscoring the point that, so long as he was a member of the full-time faculty, the courses in the curriculum were his for the taking? So broad-ranging were his interests and so fickle were his teaching preferences that each new associate dean of the law school was given, as a gag gift, a large eraser so as to be prepared to edit the course schedule to adjust to Richard's latest decision as to what he would teach each year.

Richard's possessive attitude extended to more than the curriculum of the law school. Being the most senior member of the faculty,² 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

1. WILLIAM M. SULLIVAN ET AL., *THE CARNEGIE FOUND. FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF TEACHING, EDUCATING LAWYERS: PREPARATION FOR THE PROFESSION OF LAW* (2007).

2. 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 Richard's institutional memory reached further back into the history of the law school than Von's.

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part-time faculty in rather dismal facilities without a serious academic library. 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 was 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 recruitment from the local scene to the national market. Soon, at the age of thirty-two, he was named dean. He set out determinedly to build the law school's quality and academic reputation. When the university failed to provide the resources necessary to move forward at a pace he considered acceptable, he 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. He 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 continue to press the university administration for the support that he had found wanting during his deanship.

Richard knew what a modern, robust law school should be and should offer its students. He steadily supported improvements and 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 thirty-five and the law library grow from 15,000 volumes to more than 320,000. He saw OCU LAW transform itself from a provincial school serving a predominantly local constituency 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. He saw the transition from a time when the school's top graduates were not considered for employment at the most prominent Oklahoma City law firms to the present when its graduates are partners at such firms. When, in 2003, OCU LAW achieved the long-sought-after goal of gaining membership in the Association of American Law Schools, there was no one prouder than Richard E. Coulson.

Richard's memory of the history of the law school extends back in time over forty years. He was a colleague of the pioneering faculty and administrators who began the march toward respectability on the national stage. He helped the institution absorb new waves of professors in the 1970's and thereafter. For all who joined the faculty after him, he was the link to the school's founding period.

But Richard E. Coulson also was always a link to the law school's future. He read broadly and deeply. He remained 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-1980's, he even took a self-imposed five-year 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 Carnegie Foundation report, *Educating Lawyers*—legal educators must prepare their students to *practice* law, not simply to *know* the law.

Educating lawyers requires that law schools do more than lead their students in their development of analytical and reasoning skills and their 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.³ Perhaps without articulating it at the time, Richard had taken his foray into practice to put himself in a better position to integrate what the Carnegie Report on legal education describes as “the cognitive, the practical, and the ethical-social” objectives of legal education for his students.⁴ 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 E. Coulson had been doing for decades.⁵

3. This is the insight of the Carnegie Foundation's influential study. See SULLIVAN ET AL., *supra* note 1.

4. *Id.* at 191.

5. See, e.g., Nancy H. Rogers, *Law Schools to Discuss Possible Major Changes*, NAT'L L.J., Sept. 10, 2007, at S1; Katherine Mangan, *Legal Educators Rethink How Lawyers Are Trained*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC., Jan. 11, 2008, at A12; Vesna Jaksic, *For One Law School, the Third Year is Getting Real*, NAT'L L.J., Mar. 17, 2008, at 13; Washington and Lee University School of Law, *The New Third Year: A Message from the Dean*, <http://law.wlu.edu/THIRDYEAR/> (last visited Mar. 16, 2009); Press Release, Northwestern Law Sch., Northwestern Law Announces Accelerated JD, Other Proposals

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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 then he concluded: “Law schools need serious reform.”

And so, even in retirement, Richard is still prodding, still reaching for an ever-improving future, and still serving as an indispensable link between the past and the future of the law school to which he devoted his professional career.

(June 20, 2008), <http://www.law.northwestern.edu/NEWS/NEWSDISPLAY.CFM?ID=191>; Press Release, Boston Coll. Law Sch., First-Year Curriculum Changes: Part Two (Mar. 18, 2008), <http://www.bc.edu/schools/law/newsevents/2008-archive/31408-2.html>; Press Release, Stanford Law Sch., A “3D” JD: Stanford Law School Announces New Model for Legal Education (Nov. 28, 2006), <http://www.law.stanford.edu/news/pr/47/>; Michelle Lore, *Balancing Law School Curriculums*, MINN. LAW., Oct. 26, 2007, <http://www.minnlawyer.com/article.cfm?recid=75776>; Symposium, *The Opportunity for Legal Education*, 59 MERCER L. REV. 821 (2008); Plenary Session at the Association of American Law Schools Annual Meeting: Rethinking Legal Education for the 21st Century (Jan. 4, 2008); Jonathan D. Glater, *Training Law Students for Real-Life Careers*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 31, 2007, at 9; Georgia State University College of Law Conference Announcement, International Conference on the Future of Legal Education—February 20-23, 2008, <http://law.gsu.edu/FutureOfLegalEducationConference/> (last visited Mar. 17, 2009); Tuoro College Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center Conference Announcement, Contextualizing Legal Education: MacCrate, Carnegie, Best Practices and Beyond—Oct. 3, 2008, <http://www.ssrn.com/update/lsn/lsnann/ann234.html> (last visited Mar. 17, 2009).