A Prof Who Linked Legal Education to the Legal Profession

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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 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 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, 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 pre-law school faculty. He learned much from them. He believed in experiential learning. In the mid-1980s, he took a self-imposed five years hiatus from teaching to put himself in a better position 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.

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.


II Because Richard left the faculty for private practice from 1983 to 1988, at the time of Richard’s retirement, Von Crefol 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.

III EDUCATING LAWYERS at 12-14, 194-97.

IV Id.


VI and