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THE QUEST TO ACHIEVE TRUE “TOP QUARTILE” STATUS: CREATING AND SUSTAINING AN AFFIRMING LAW SCHOOL COMMUNITY

*Patrick K. Hetrick**

I. INTRODUCTION

I confess. I am a consummate eavesdropper. Airports, flights in the cramped quarters of coach class, coffee shops, conventions, and law school functions are some of the venues that provide fertile sources of others' conversations. It has dawned on me as I listen to this real-time chatter that most of it is negative, and that the negativity index tends to increase significantly when the topic of discussion turns to the workplace. Recently, for example, two strangers on an airplane made happy references to family members and hobbies, until the discussion veered into their professions and places of employment. One worked in computer sales for a prominent national chain, but based on his description, he was stuck in a company led by a group of morons and backbiters who knew little about how to run an effective sales operation. I was delighted to overhear that the other worked for a major university. Unfortunately, however, that university turned out to be an apparently abominable place to work for numerous reasons.

When I attend national meetings of law professors, my trained ears frequently pick up equally unflattering references to law schools, faculties, and deans. Indeed, deans appear to be nothing but a bunch of numbskulls. After listening to many a professor's description of his or her law school, a neutral observer would surmise that the poor soul teaches in a subsidiary of hell itself. Remembering the biblical reference to getting the beam out your own eye first, I began to reflect on my own behavior as a faculty member and former dean. Have I been unduly negative, cynical, or pessimistic when it comes to discussing my own law school and its mission? Yes, yes, and yes.

Based on my experiences on two law faculties and my observations on ABA site evaluation teams over the past twenty years, it strikes me that law faculties are often like an archipelago, with each island occupied by one faculty member. Living on your own island is not a good thing. It breeds disinterest and indifference concerning what is taking place on the other islands. The general goals and missions of the law school to such faculties stand at a distant and low

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level of priority. After all, promoting and advancing the mission of the law school is the job of the deans, webmasters, and marketing consultants.

II. TEN GUIDELINES TO CREATING AND SUSTAINING AN AFFIRMING LAW SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Law faculty members need to make a paradigm shift in attitude, commitment, demeanor, and communication to create and sustain an affirming law school community. I suggest the following ten guidelines:

1. *Celebrate with sincerity and humility the accomplishments of your colleagues. Do this on a regular basis. Make the sharing of compliments a habit.*

Inform others, including students in your classes, colleagues at meetings, and visitors to campus, when a colleague has published an article, been appointed to a law revision committee, or received an award. Share good news about your colleagues! Focus on the other members of the team. The vision here is that of a team, not an archipelago of egos.

2. *Publicly affirm the teaching ability and expertise of your colleagues on a regular basis.*

Dizzy Dean (a reference to a famous major league pitcher, not my nickname during my deanship) once said: "It ain't braggin' if you can back it up."¹ Better yet, if you place a sincere focus on the many talents and positive attributes of your colleagues, "it ain't braggin'." At Campbell University's Norman Adrian Wiggins School of Law, for example, our most innovative teacher in terms of computer-assisted learning also happens to be our most senior colleague. Dr. J. Stanley McQuade has embraced computer technology and is constantly developing new online teaching and interactive learning techniques. Students, alumni, and visitors ought to be told about Stanley's example and leadership.

3. *Publicly support the dean, even though you differ with him or her on law school policies and decisions.*

This one really hurts, since too many of us enjoy dean-bashing: If you have an issue with the dean, deal with it at a face-to-face meeting. Do not be the source of negative electronic spitballs via e-mail. Forsake the constant gripe sessions with your colleagues. Never share your perceptions of the dean's shortcomings in class or during individual conversations with students or alumni. Confine disagreements to an honest and open discussion of issues, not

1. The Official Site of Dizee Dean, <http://www.dizzydean.com/quotes.htm> (last visited Oct. 8, 2007).

personalities. Believe me, it can be lonely in the dean's office, and, believe me, I have violated this rule as a faculty member.

4. *Quit bad-mouthing the central administration of the university.*

Rediscover your own university! It is not a separate entity from the law school; rather, the law school is an integral part of a vibrant university community. Start finding positive things to say about the central administration. Do not share institutional dirty laundry in public. If this proves to be an impossible undertaking, have the moral courage to seek a teaching position elsewhere. (If you pursue this suggestion, it is likely that you will have numerous problems with the central administration at your new location.)

5. *Warmly greet visitors to the law school. Introduce yourself.*

Several decades ago, I visited the Columbia Law School with a colleague. During our visit, Professors Walter Gellhorn and Peter Straus went out of their way to make two visitors from Buies Creek, North Carolina feel welcome. The warm and sincere hospitality of busy scholars and leaders in American legal education created in our minds a lasting, positive impression of the Columbia Law School.

Go ye and do likewise. Share your business card. There are always extra law school brochures, copies of law review articles, and other publications sitting on shelves at most law schools. Instead of letting them gather dust, offer them to visitors. Give a visitor a tour of your favorite parts of the law school and introduce him or her to colleagues and co-workers you encounter during the tour.

6. *Celebrate the accomplishments and personal milestones of your students.*

Take a few minutes before class officially begins to seek "student news." When a moot court trial, client counseling, or other student team has competed, affirm the accomplishments of team members in class and during your conversations with students outside of class. Allow students at their option to share personal news, both good and bad. Happy milestones could include a marriage or birth of a child. Challenges might be a long-term illness or loss of a loved one. The idea here is that of a law school "family" where a level of trust, caring, and understanding develops within the law school community.

Keep a personal journal of things students have shared with you. Otherwise, details will become lost and misplaced in the clutter of your mind.

7. *Treat the support staff as equals and professionals.*

The days of the "boss" and the "secretaries" are now ancient history. The hallmarks of an effective law school include the concepts of meaningful teamwork and recognition of the worth of all members of the law school team. Take the time to acknowledge the many contributions that members of the support staff make to assist you in your teaching mission.

8. *Write positive notes and e-mails to students, colleagues, and alumni.*

Make liberal use of handwritten notes. I try to write at least one note each week to a law student. Most of these notes are two-sentence compliments regarding a class recitation, election to student organization office, success on a quiz or final exam, participation on a trial or moot court team, or other milestones and achievements. I am not so old fashioned to forego e-mail messages and I send many of them, but a personal handwritten note has a more lasting effect.

Do not forget your colleagues. When a colleague has published a law review article, take time to read it and follow through with a written congratulatory message. It is hard work putting together a decent article in the wake of committee meetings, professional responsibilities, class schedules, student counseling, and the many other tasks facing a law professor on a daily basis. Celebrate the successes of others with enthusiasm.

Keep in touch with alumni through handwritten notes, e-mail messages, and phone calls. If each faculty member and dean takes a few minutes to write one alumni letter per week, several thousand will be reached in a personal way in the course of one year. These notes will provide a personal touch overlay on the fancy brochures, fundraising form letters, and web page glitz that tends to define the extent of alumni relations at some institutions.

9. *Don't underestimate the infectious power of enthusiasm.*

Dr. John J. Broderick (fondly known as "the Chief" by his students) was the founding associate dean when Campbell opened its new law school in 1975. He came to Campbell after retiring from the law faculty at his first love, The University of Notre Dame. His devotion to Notre Dame never diminished during his two decades of service at Campbell. Without sacrificing that first loyalty, Dr. Broderick became a fervent supporter and spokesperson for Campbell's law school.

Many prospective law students who visited our campus during those early years with the idea that Campbell might be a solid "second" or "backup" choice left with the impression of the new law school as a first choice. Exposure to the mesmerizing ardor of an elderly associate dean made the difference.

10. *Add a positive reference to the law school on your voice mail message.*

Each professor should be encouraged to add a personal, positive reference to the law school in his or her voice mail message. Packing a public relations punch into each phone contact costs nothing and helps to get the message across that an atmosphere of success and teamwork exists at the law school.

III. CONCLUSION

Perhaps much of what I suggest above is corny, old-fashioned, and even unrealistic, but my goal is to describe a law school environment in which each

faculty member assumes a leadership responsibility to wholeheartedly support and enhance the law school's mission on a daily basis.

The good news is that law faculties are comprised of persons with extraordinary talents. These talents should be focused more on teamwork, and one important strategic goal of the team must be to develop and sustain a positive and uplifting law school culture. If this is taken seriously, an inspiring vision of purpose and mission will catch on and radiate outward to the various law school publics. The transformed landscape of the law school will render it a place where students want to be; applicants want to come; and faculty members, deans, and professional staff want to stay. The law school will have achieved true top-quartile status.