

University of Missouri School of Law Scholarship Repository

Faculty Publications

Spring 1997

A Form Letter to the Dean

R. Lawrence Dessem

University of Missouri School of Law, DessemRL@missouri.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.law.missouri.edu/facpubs>



Part of the [Legal Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

R. Lawrence Dessem, A Form Letter to the Dean, 47 J. Legal Educ. 118 (1997)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by University of Missouri School of Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of University of Missouri School of Law Scholarship Repository.

A Form Letter to the Dean

R. Lawrence Dessem

Technology has had a major impact upon both the legal profession and legal education in recent years, and this trend shows no sign of abating. Law offices and law schools have installed computer networks; law school computer labs and "hot carrels" within law libraries abound; and attorneys and law professors seek ever-larger computer systems and ever-faster means of electronic communication.

As a fledgling law school dean, I welcome these trends. Modern word processing permits me to churn out an imposing written work product, including memoranda to faculty, staff, and university administrators, letters to alumni, and commentary such as this article. It is difficult to measure the concrete accomplishments of a law school dean, which makes it all the more comforting to contemplate the impressively thick files of correspondence and memoranda that I've created in my short tenure as a law school administrator.

The ease of modern communication also has increased the likelihood that written responses will be prepared in reply to my own communications and that those responses will themselves be substantial. Instead of simply having a conversation with a faculty member or calling an alumnus on the telephone, it is now just as easy to exchange written letters or memoranda. Although little may actually be accomplished by this barrage of paper, I, as dean, have the satisfaction of being able to look at the resulting bulging correspondence binders and feel a sense of measurable accomplishment.

Though it doesn't create such a satisfying physical work product as letters and memoranda, electronic mail has made communication even easier. As a result, e-mail has increased the volume of communication within law schools, between academics across the country, and among professionals around the world. Stupid memos that otherwise would have taken a day or two to reach their intended recipient now are received instantaneously. In an earlier era, a letter that might irritate or inflame would be put to one side for a day or two before mailing. The author then might think better of sending the correspon-

R. Lawrence Dessem is Dean and Professor, Mercer University Law School.

Before becoming dean at Mercer Law School in 1995, I served as professor and, from 1993 to 1995, associate dean for academic affairs at the University of Tennessee. This article is based upon my personal observations as professor, associate dean, and dean, as well as conversations with other law school deans. Although this introductory footnote is typically used to thank those who have contributed to the finished article, none of my former colleagues, present colleagues, or fellow deans should presume that any of our correspondence or other dealings provided a basis for anything in this article. On the other hand, they just might have.

Journal of Legal Education, Volume 47, Number 1 (March 1997)

dence, or at least might tone it down a bit. Today, e-mail missives often are sent immediately, before tempers have cooled. Believe it or not, a disproportionate number of these messages are directed to law school deans.¹

Even though modern word processing and electronic mail greatly facilitate communication, one still must compose the basic letter, memorandum, or electronic message. In an effort to cut down on the time and intellectual intensity of this endeavor, I offer the following suggested form letter to the dean. This format may be used within basic word processing packages or for creating e-mail messages. All you need do is choose the most appropriate insertions for your basic message, and the message will be electronically created.

There is, in fact, no reason why this entire process cannot be totally automated. Particular memoranda can be sent to the dean on an automatic predetermined schedule. Electronic mail systems can be programmed so that messages automatically will be sent at some specified future time (such as immediately after each faculty meeting or after the announcement of summer research stipends or faculty raises). Thus the communication can be sent to the dean even though the sender may be out of the office on the day in question, perhaps testifying before Congress, working on a manuscript addressing the many Third Amendment issues raised by the Internal Revenue Code, or simply unwinding after a week that has demanded six hours of classroom teaching, review of several new journal articles, and service as a practice judge for the Save the Manatees Moot Court Competition.

What follows is the form letter. As will be discussed in my forthcoming book *Faculty Are from Mars, Deans Are from Venus*, we all must work to improve communication between law school faculty and deans. This is my contribution to that effort.

1. No, I don't have any empirical data to support this last statement, but I'm hoping that those who never read footnotes will assume that this footnote contains supporting authority. If I must provide actual authority: I've heard other law school deans say this sort of thing, when grousing about their faculties and university administrators, at gatherings of deans in some of the finest resort locations in the country.

Dear [Insert No. 1]:

Never in my ____² years on this faculty have I witnessed such [Insert No. 2] as you've just pulled.

This is [Insert No. 3]! Don't you realize that [Insert No. 4]? And it's not just me, but I speak on behalf of [Insert No. 5].

It's time you stop pandering to [Insert No. 6], and listen to [Insert No. 7]. Don't you realize that the entire fate of this law school hinges on whether I [Insert No. 8]? Why won't you simply realize that your job as dean is to raise lots and lots of money and leave the faculty alone?³

[Insert No. 9]

Signature

cc: [Insert No. 10]

This letter can be modified to fit the particular context of your law school and your personal situation. Indeed, creative professors may suggest to their deans that such editorial changes are sufficient to satisfy the scholarly writing expectations for tenure and promotion or are worthy of a summer research stipend. Because of the universal utility of such a form letter, I am considering an offer to license the letter to providers of electronic "faculty office suites" and word-processing packages. My current writing projects include a version of this letter that can be sent to deans from students, university officials, and alumni. Please look for these upcoming form letters and recommend them to disgruntled students, petty university administrators, and overbearing alumni from whom you know your dean would like to hear.

I've also drafted a form letter for deans to use in responding to such constituencies. However, I don't want to blow the cover of any dean who may use this form letter by revealing its contents at this time.

2. If you're not sure exactly how many years you've been at your particular law school, just pick a number. Your dean probably won't know either.
3. While I considered offering multiple-choice insertions at this point, I could think of no situation in which a faculty member would want to describe the role of law school dean as anything other than raising lots and lots of money and leaving the faculty alone.

Inserts for Form Letter*Insert No. 1*

Your favorite title for your dean should be inserted at this point. While "Dean" will suffice for traditionalists, others may prefer such titles as:

- a. Fearless Leader
- b. Bozo
- c. Camel Breath
- d. Second-Rate Intellect with the Largest Office
- e. Occupant

The title chosen is usually a tip-off to the dean as to what is to come in the remainder of the letter.

Insert No. 2

- a. a stunt
- b. an act of heartless cruelty
- c. a display of Machiavellian treachery
- d. a sniveling act of cowardice

Insert No. 3

- a. sheer stupidity
- b. lunacy
- c. still further evidence that the evolutionary mystery of the missing link may soon be solved
- d. war

Insert No. 4

- a. faculty have rights too
- b. faculty have feelings too
- c. faculty have rights and feelings too
- d. faculty can make your life hell if they don't agree with you on significant issues of principle such as whether our faculty meetings are held at 3:30 or 3:35 p.m.

Insert No. 5

- a. the entire faculty
- b. all law school faculties in the country
- c. huddled masses yearning to breathe free
- d. generations yet unborn

Insert No. 6

- a. the students
- b. the staff
- c. the alumni
- d. the president of the university
- e. people who disagree with me

Insert No. 7

- a. me
- b. people such as me
- c. people who think like me
- d. me

Insert No. 8

- a. receive a summer research stipend
- b. receive a larger raise
- c. receive a reserved parking space
- d. receive the occasional services of the dean's secretary, the dean's executive assistant, the secretary to the dean's executive assistant, or one of the other myriad of staff members ensconced in the dean's suite

Insert No. 9

- a. Your obedient servant,
- b. Your colleague and friend,
- c. Your boss,
- d. Your intellectual superior,
- e. You're lucky to have me on your faculty.

Insert No. 10

- a. entire faculty
- b. all tenured faculty
- c. all faculty who will agree with the views expressed in letter
- d. president of the university
- e. president of the United States
- f. the dean's mother