

# University of Missouri School of Law Scholarship Repository

---

Faculty Publications

---

Fall 2003

## Ten Things Deans Can Do with Students

R. Lawrence Dessem

*University of Missouri School of Law*, [DessemRL@missouri.edu](mailto: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, Ten Things Deans Can Do with Students, 35 U. Tol. L. Rev. 45 (2003)

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.

# TEN THINGS DEANS CAN DO WITH STUDENTS

*R. Lawrence Dessem*

SINCE its inception several years ago, this annual symposium has become a wonderful repository of information and insights concerning virtually all aspects of law school deaning. It is difficult to think of areas of deaning that have not been, quite nicely considered in earlier essays. Having written two articles myself in these symposia,<sup>1</sup> I paused before deciding upon the topic for my essay for this year's symposium.

There are a multiplicity of tasks, challenges and constituencies that face any law school dean. At the core of our educational enterprises, however, are our students. As I sometimes remind my faculty colleagues (and myself, on occasion), law schools exist because of our students and not the other way around. Hence this article's focus on students.

At least one other, very experienced, dean has suggested that students are, in fact, the "primary constituency" of the law school dean.<sup>2</sup> Student relations is also a standard topic at the ABA New Deans' Workshop each June, although those sessions typically focus on problem situations and hypotheticals. While problems do indeed arise with students and other constituencies during a deanship, student relationships can be among the most positive aspects of one's tenure as dean. In fact, building a strong relationship with students provides helpful reserves of political capital upon which to draw during times of student tension and unrest.

A healthy relationship with students is beneficial to one's deanship, law school, and to the dean herself. An experienced provost once told me that serving as dean was the best job that he had ever had because he still had significant contact with students. Deans should take advantage of the possibilities for student interactions that their deanships afford them. What follows is my "top ten list" of ways in which deans can build a positive relationship with their students.

## 1 *Meet and Greet Them*

One of the great (and fun) duties of the dean is to greet newcomers to the law school. Often this involves formal welcomes at law school events. One standard such event is the orientation for new law students, during which the dean typically addresses and welcomes new students to the law school. This is an important event for new students, the law school, and the dean, in large part because this will be the first exposure to the dean for many of the new students.

---

\* Dean and Professor of Law, University of Missouri-Columbia School of Law.

1. R. Lawrence Dessem, *Top Ten Reasons to Be a Law School Dean*, 33 U. TOL. L. REV. 19 (2001); R. Lawrence Dessem, *Unsolicited Advice to Law School Dean Search Committees*, 34 U. TOL. L. REV. 55 (2002).

2. N. William Hines, *Are Students a Dean's Primary Constituency?* 31 U. TOL. L. REV. 629 (2000). See also Laura Rothstein, *Ed Sullivan and I Love Lucy: Images of Deaning—Students as a Key Internal Constituency*, 33 U. TOL. L. REV. 167 (2001).

My own practice is to not only address the students but to introduce them to the faculty under whom they will study for the next three years. I work particularly hard to learn details about individual faculty members that I can share with the students. Thus, in addition to telling students the courses that particular faculty teach, I'm also likely to mention a recent article that they have written, an honor they have received, or a leadership position that they may hold outside the law school. This is a unique opportunity for the dean not only to impress new students with the quality and diversity of the faculty, but also to suggest to them the breadth of faculty duties (particularly outside the classroom).

I also make it a practice during the orientation period to be visible to the first-year students. This may involve meeting students informally in the hallways, joining them on a public service project, dropping by during the lunch hour, or chatting with them while they buy books or perform other first-week tasks. Starting law school is intimidating for the most self-confident student, and informal welcomes and small kindnesses are greatly appreciated (and remembered) by those who will be your students for the next three years.

Students sometimes themselves take the initiative by seeking out the dean to say hello or, perhaps, to invite him to address a student group. These can be good occasions to get to know students. Whether it be at a meeting of a student political group, a student affinity group, or an organization that works for social justice, these can be very good occasions at which to get to know your students.

Deans also should look for opportunities to host students during the first weeks of school and throughout the school year. While it's difficult to invite the entire student body over to one's home, my wife and I have enjoyed hosting receptions and informal dinners for student advisees and LL.M. students (many of whom may be from other nations). Another possibility is an open house for the students in one's law school course, although many deans do not teach and the logistics of such an open house may pose practical difficulties.

Without creating such opportunities to get to know students, the dean's student contacts may be limited to high achieving students (such as the editor-in-chief of the law review and the presidents of the student bar association and moot court board) or those who are in academic or other difficulty. By reaching out beyond such students, the dean achieves a more balanced view of students, their hopes and dreams, and their role within the law school. There also are ripple effects from individual student contacts, and the good will generated by such contacts generally extends beyond the students directly involved to their friends and associates. "All politics is local," and the dean's contacts with many individual students can create political capital that is quite valuable both to the dean and the law school.

## 2. *Teach Them*

One great way to reach and get to know a good cross sample of students is to teach. Totally apart from its impact upon students and the law school, teaching can be very important to the dean as a person.<sup>3</sup> One of the major reasons why most people enter legal education is to teach, and few things in life are as satisfying—

---

3. Jeffrey A. Brauch, *Why I Must Teach*, 34 U. Tol. L. Rev. 23 (2002).

especially within a law school (and especially in the first year of law school). Teaching also gives the dean credibility within the faculty, as she, too, experiences the fact that “Room 107 is always too hot” or “there’s never enough chalk in the Moot Courtroom.”<sup>4</sup> Teaching, in fact, gives the dean credibility with most major law school constituencies, from students to faculty to alumni to members of the bench and bar. Finally, by teaching the dean continues her involvement with her discipline—which not only sets a good example for her colleagues but also helps to prepare her for the day when she will step back from deaning<sup>5</sup> to return to the full-time faculty.

Despite the satisfactions and benefits from teaching, the many other demands of deaning keep many deans out of classroom teaching. In the not-too-distant past, deans were expected to teach, and this still is the expectation at some law schools. However, in virtually all modern deanships there are too many tasks for any one individual to complete successfully. Faced with the need to spend time with alumni, focus on faculty recruitment and development, and undertake a major development campaign, the dean may not be able to make the time for classroom teaching.<sup>6</sup>

At some point the attempt to teach also becomes unfair to students because of the need to reschedule significant numbers of classes to accommodate the dean’s travel schedule. Nor is teaching under such conditions particularly satisfying to the dean. Knowing that—with more time—the dean could have taught a better class (and has, indeed, done so many times in the past) can be particularly frustrating, especially when other important tasks may have been slighted in order to make such teaching possible.<sup>7</sup>

The dean therefore should think strategically about potential teaching assignments. The question may not be whether or not to teach, but when and how. While a three-hour per week course might not be compatible with the dean’s travel schedule or other duties, perhaps a two-hour seminar could be accommodated. Shorter, more intensive mini-courses may be easier to schedule than full-semester courses. Writing courses and seminars may be more compatible with the schedule of a busy dean (who may be better able to evaluate student papers on airplanes than meet regularly scheduled classes at the law school). The concluding phase of a capital campaign or the first year of a deanship may preclude teaching duties that might be possible in other years. If other duties preclude the dean from full-time teaching in a given year, team teaching or guest lecturing in the courses of other faculty might allow the dean to interact with students in a classroom setting.

---

4. Having experienced such teaching challenges, however, faculty colleagues will look to the dean to solve many of these in her role as dean.

5. Notice that I didn’t say “step down from deaning” (which is a subject for another essay).

6. Dean Jeffrey Brauch, however, suggests that the decision not to teach may not “free up” significant additional time for other responsibilities. Brauch, *supra* note 3, at 23 (“I’ve come to believe that administrative work, like nature itself, abhors a vacuum. It expands to fill any available space.”).

7. Teaching as dean has given me a real empathy for adjunct professors who take time from their hectic schedules simply because they love teaching and mentoring law students. These judges and lawyers are true heroes whom we should do more to recognize within legal education.

By choosing to teach, the dean makes a statement about her priorities and her vision for the law school.<sup>8</sup> Teaching, particularly good teaching, requires time, however, and the dean must appropriately balance the demands of teaching against her other priorities in the semester or year in question.

### 3. *Advise Them*

While the demands of some deanships may preclude teaching, the dean may be able to develop significant contacts with students as a faculty advisor. At most law schools faculty are assigned to advise groups of first-year students, and there is no reason why the dean cannot herself serve as a faculty advisor. Not only can this provide the dean with individual student contacts, but she can model good faculty behavior by, for instance, meeting regularly with her student advisees. In addition, service as a faculty advisor may provide the dean with opportunities to invite a select group of students (her advisees) for lunch or to her home for an informal dinner or reception.

On occasion, I have served as faculty advisor to student groups. Such advising may or may not fit the culture of particular law schools, and one must be concerned about any perception that the "dean's group" gets more resources or attention than other student groups. However, when student groups have asked me to serve as faculty advisor, I have gladly accepted.

During my tenure as dean, I also have served as the faculty advisor to a moot court team. The faculty advisor to our school's moot court board could not find a faculty member to advise a particular team and, modeling good faculty behavior, I offered to advise the team myself. This permitted me to work with a terrific group of students while they were at their very best, and it has been one of the most enjoyable and rewarding aspects of my career in legal education. In addition to working with the students, advising this team brought me into contact with local judges and attorneys who judged moot court practice rounds. This experience also reminded me, on a daily basis, of what our law school was all about.

The dean should be aware of many less formal opportunities to advise and help individual students. Alumni will sometimes tell the dean about a desire to hire a new attorney, and students are (understandably) grateful to receive such news. The dean may become a *de facto* mentor and advisor for her student research assistant. Students also will from time to time come to the dean seeking general career or other counseling, and time spent with such students can be extremely rewarding for both student and dean.

### 4. *Inform Them*

One of the major issues within any law school (or any other institution) is communication. As a general rule, deans should quite liberally estimate the amount of communication necessary on major issues and then provide two or three times

---

8. This is a statement to the faculty as well as to the students and other law school constituencies. I therefore have taught "unpopular" courses to set a good example for other faculty and encourage them to share in such teaching duties.

more than this amount. This rule applies to communications with all major constituencies, including students.

Different options exist for communicating with students. Most law schools have an internal newsletter to inform students about everything from class registration to upcoming speakers to commencement details. Email provides a particularly efficient way to distribute such information to students, and the dean should be sure that such e-mails and e-newsletters are used to keep students informed about ongoing law school developments.

In addition to providing students with the basic facts concerning law school events, deans should consider writing a short column in the law school newsletter or the student newspaper. These columns allow the dean to address topics of current concern in her own voice and not only to inform but also to set agendas and mold opinion within the student body.

In this regard, face-to-face meetings with students are generally more effective than the written word. Some deans use “town hall meetings” or other open sessions to provide students with the opportunity to question the dean about issues of current interest. Pizza and soft drinks are a great way to increase student attendance at such open meetings.<sup>9</sup> At the law school administrators’ meeting before such student sessions, I ask my colleagues about topics that they believe are likely to be the subject of student questions. I’ve also had individuals such as the dean of students and dean for academic affairs present at such sessions to provide detailed answers to questions that may be beyond my immediate knowledge.

## 5 *Involve Them*

Students are not just in law school to attend classes and earn their degrees; they can make significant contributions to their law schools during their three or four years as students. Not only do students like to be involved in the life of the law school, but their perspective is unique and they often make significant contributions that would not come from other constituencies.

When they become involved in the law school, students realize that they have a stake in it that goes beyond their own legal study. Engaged students become engaged alumni, and it is much easier to encourage identification with the law school while individuals are still students.

Most law schools involve students on faculty committees, which not only informs students about the substantive issues facing the law school but also gives them an opportunity to work with faculty and administrators outside the classroom setting. The precise nature of student involvement on faculty committees varies from school to school, but such committee appointments should be seen as a positive way in which to get students involved within the law school.

Traditions also vary with respect to student involvement in the selection of commencement and other law school speakers. Whether or not students will themselves select speakers, consulting appropriate students or student groups makes sense in many cases. Less successful, though, are student referenda on

---

<sup>9</sup> Along these lines, some deans encourage students to sign up for informal “dutch treat” lunches or breakfasts with the dean.

commencement and other major speakers. The dean usually is the person who must secure the commencement speaker. This takes time, and the students' first choice often does not accept the invitation to speak. Sandra Day O'Connor will give very few law school commencement addresses in a given year, and students need to be educated about just who the dean is likely to be able to obtain as a speaker.

Regardless of who chooses and invites particular speakers, the dean should consider ways in which students can interact with them. If a well known speaker will be visiting the law school, students might be asked to pick up the speaker at the airport, be invited to dinner with the speaker the evening before the speech, or, if circumstances warrant, actually introduce the speaker. Student involvement with Supreme Court justices and other prominent visitors to the law school can provide them with memories and allegiances to the law school that will last a lifetime.

## 6. *Connect with Them*

Students need not only to be connected to their law school, but with the dean. By informing and involving them, the dean may establish just such a connection with students. Dean Thomas Sullivan has defined decanal leadership as the creation and management of relationships,<sup>10</sup> and the relationships that can be built with students are important to any deanship.

Deans are more likely to connect with students if they understand what it means to be a modern law student. Such a realization comes both from formal and informal interactions with students. Today's law students are faced with significant demands and expectations placed upon them by their professors, their colleagues, their families, and the extremely large debt loads that so many have undertaken to finance their legal educations. To hear from students on such topics makes it more likely that the dean can truly connect with them, as opposed to simply seeing students as another constituency with which she "must deal."

In order to understand students and their concerns, some deans hold sessions with randomly chosen student "focus groups." These students are asked about particular law school issues, but also are encouraged to suggest other matters of student concern. By holding such sessions away from the law school, the dean and the students are less likely to be distracted by other obligations and a true dialogue may emerge.

One way in which some deans quite literally "change places" with their students is by offering a "Dean for a Day" prize in a student charity auction. The high bidder for such an award is able to park in the dean's parking slot (if there is one), work in the dean's office for a day, and deal with various matters that senior administrators bring to the dean during the course of the day. The major restrictions that I impose upon the powers of the "Dean for a Day" are that he or she cannot change grades, alter salaries, or hire or fire either faculty or staff.

While the student serves as dean, I assume the role of "Student for a Day." In this role, I attend the student's courses, take class notes, and otherwise reenter the world of our students. Not only is it great fun to attend classes as a student, but

---

10. E. Thomas Sullivan, *Decanal Leadership: Managing Relationships*, 31 U. Tol. L. Rev. 749, 750 (2000).

doing the daily reading that we assign to our students is a great reminder of the significant amount of work that we expect from them.

Our relationships with students and others, however, generally are not built upon special days or occasions, but stem from much more routine and daily interactions. The kind word in the hallway or time spent with a student facing a personal crisis is likely to be appreciated not only by that student but also by others who witness or learn about such acts of kindness. A dean's connection with "the students" is a composite of many separate connections with many individual students. The dean who realizes this is much more likely to forge relationships that produce lasting benefits to the students and their school.

### 7 *Connect Them with Each Other*

Not only is it important for the dean to connect with students, but the dean has the rare ability to connect students with each other. One of the important functions of any dean is facilitating connections, and connecting students and student groups with each other is another way to make a law school stronger and more vibrant.

As dean I meet each semester with the leaders of student groups. During these sessions, I talk with the students about current developments at the law school and take questions from them on any subject. In addition, I ask the student leaders to tell me and their fellow students about projects that their groups are planning. In this fashion students learn about activities planned by one group that may interest another. Then students often decide to work collaboratively on projects, whether co-sponsoring a speaker, joining together on a fund-raiser or other volunteer project, or jointly sponsoring a social event.

Most law schools have a plethora of formal and informal student organizations. By combining their efforts to jointly sponsor events and activities, their impact can be magnified significantly. In addition, student organizations are then less likely to compete with each other for the time of their fellow students. Rather than have several speakers presented by student groups on the same day (and often at the same time on the same day), why not encourage student groups to combine their resources to sponsor a single speaker and thereby ensure a respectable showing at the event?

The curricula of most law schools require little collaborative work, nor do most law schools teach the collaborative work skills that will be essential for many attorneys in practice.<sup>11</sup> This makes it even more important that the dean encourage students and student organizations to work together on co-curricular projects and otherwise become connected with one another during their time at the law school.

---

11. Task Force on Law Schools and the Profession: Narrowing the Gap, Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar, American Bar Association, *Legal Education and Professional Development—An Educational Continuum* (1992) available at <http://www.abanet.org/legaled/publications/onlinepubs/maccrate.html> (last visited Oct. 20, 2003). Fundamental Lawyering Skill 9.4 notes that lawyers should be able to develop "systems and procedures for effectively working with other people."

## 8. *Connect Them with Alumni and the Profession*

Not only should the dean work to connect students with one another, but she is uniquely situated to connect students with alumni and the legal profession. Students are understandably interested in just what lawyers do in practice, and alumni are very interested in the successes and challenges of current law students. The dean can serve as a bridge between these two important law school constituencies.

The dean may help to connect these constituencies simply by informing each about the other. A standard part of any dean's "stump speech" about the law school will focus on students: how the school is doing in attracting students, who they are and where they come from, where they are headed after law school, and student activities, awards and accomplishments. Some of this narrative relates directly to the dean's development duties. Informing alumni about the law school debt load that today's students carry leads directly to appeals for student scholarships, while many alumni are interested in supporting student groups, the law reviews, or the moot court program. Students, on the other hand, are curious about the accomplishments of alumni, especially those practicing in the areas in which the students are particularly interested.

Communication with students and alumni can occur through law school alumni magazines and other publications, through programs that bring students together with alumni (such as career services panels or the inclusion of students in alumni events), or by the dean simply informing each group about the other. Alumni and students also can connect with each other at special law school events such as awards ceremonies, Law Day celebrations, moot court competitions, or Inns of Court meetings.

Some deans host lunches or other gatherings to bring together students with alumni. A "dean's roundtable" program is one way to bring together small groups of students and alumni with interesting practice or life stories. Not only can such events open student eyes to the varieties and possibilities of practice, but the informal conversations that result (often over lunch) can be a very effective way of reconnecting alumni with the law school.

I also have tried to facilitate student interaction with the organized bar, by for instance, hosting lunches for student leaders to meet with bar leaders (especially the leadership of the bar's younger lawyers groups). The focus of these gatherings has been to encourage interactions among these groups, particularly with respect to public service projects that may be of interest to both students and lawyers. I also have encouraged bar groups to include student representatives on bar committees and asked local bar associations to consider creating student memberships in their organizations.

Transition from law school to legal practice can be a difficult experience for many law students. Helping to connect students with alumni and others within the profession can ease the transition and improve the students' chances of success after graduation.

## 9 *Brag on Them*

One of the most enjoyable tasks for any dean is celebrating the law school and its various constituencies. The primary task of law schools is training students, and the dean therefore frequently finds himself singing the praises of these students.

Not only should students be featured in alumni publications, but students should receive copies of those publications in their student mailboxes. They should know first-hand that the law school and the dean are proud of their accomplishments and that those accomplishments are being shared with alumni and others outside the immediate law school family.

I send many notes throughout the year congratulating students upon being named to the dean's list, selected for the law review, excelling in moot court competitions, winning student awards, or receiving special community recognition. After signing a stack of such congratulatory notes during a particularly busy semester, I wondered whether these notes were really appreciated or worth the effort. Several days later, my secretary told me that one of the notes had become soiled by the student recipient; he had come to the deans' office asking about a new copy of the congratulatory letter so that he could show it to his parents and have it framed for his new office. I therefore continue to send such letters and look for other ways in which to celebrate student success, make students proud, and spread the word about outstanding student achievements.

## 10. *Learn from and Enjoy Them*

The best teachers constantly learn from their students, just as attentive parents learn lessons from their children that are not learned in any other way. These lessons are learned, however, only by teachers and parents who are open to such learning and take the time to reflect on parenting, teaching, and their students and children. So it is with service as dean: There is a tendency to become so caught up in the myriad day-to-day tasks of deaning that one can overlook the lessons that our students can teach us and the joys that their successes and achievements can bring us.

Perhaps the key to learning such lessons and feeling such joys is getting to know students as individuals. Commencement is the high point of the year for me, because of the student accomplishments that we celebrate on that occasion. Knowing the paths that have brought individual students to their commencement makes the ceremony all the more significant. As I shake the hand of each student on the stage, I may realize that particular students have succeeded in law school despite personal loss, physical disability while raising small children, or by triumphing over adversity. I am inspired by these successes, and I have become a fuller person by having played even a small part in these personal victories.

Commencement, though, comes only once (or perhaps twice) each year, and I need to remind myself on a more frequent basis about such student successes. On the walls of the law schools where I have served as dean are composite photographs of each year's graduating class. Every few weeks I'll look at those composites, perhaps at the end of a busy day when the law school building is otherwise empty. I'll find those students who I've taught, and worked with, and known in many ways.

They now are practicing law and raising families and serving well their clients and their communities. Knowing that I've helped many of them, even indirectly and in small ways, reminds me of why I serve as dean.