From the Dean

The Right Dean at the Right Time

by Daniel Keating, Dean and Tyrrell Williams Professor of Law

In this period of decanal transition, it is only natural for me to reflect on the two deans with whom I’ve worked in my more than 17 years at the School of Law and to look ahead to working with our new dean. The product of my reflections is the following three observations. First, I have been very privileged to work for (and in the case of the new dean, to help recruit) three outstanding law school deans. Second, even though all are excellent in their own ways, each one is very different from the other two. Third, this institution seems to have a knack for hiring the right dean at the right time.

The last of these observations is probably the most important one. I remember where this School of Law stood when I was hired during Dan Ellis’s first year as dean. Mudd Hall, the infamous law school building, was adversely affecting our student admissions, our daily operations, and our very self-respect as an institution. The School’s alumni relations efforts were just getting started in a serious way, but we had not yet cultivated the critical mass of committed alumni that would be needed to mount an effective building campaign. Our teaching tradition was clearly established by that point, but support for faculty scholarship had not reached levels that were competitive with the best law schools in the country. Dan Ellis, it turned out, was exactly the right person to meet and overcome all those challenges. Dan’s legacies to the School, among others, were our beautiful and superbly functional Anheuser-Busch Hall, a rejuvenated and energized alumni base, and a faculty that approaches its scholarship just as passionately as its teaching.

Then came Joel Seligman. With the building built and the scholarly culture reinforced, we now needed a more distinctive institutional identity. Without wasting any time, Joel helped identify our School’s signature strengths, and built several exciting and high-profile programs around them. He put a priority on making this a student-friendly institution, pouring significant resources into all sorts of student services, from career services to public interest. He expanded the size and scope of our faculty, and reinforced the gains achieved by Dan Ellis in the areas of alumni involvement and scholarly culture. Joel also was a master at getting the word out about who we are and what we are doing. The byproduct of all these efforts was greater prestige and visibility for our School, along with increased national rankings. Like Dan Ellis, Joel was exactly what we needed at that time in our history.

Now it’s Kent Syverud’s turn. While Kent will not be joining us full time until January 1, 2006, we have every reason to believe that once again we have hired “the right dean at the right time.” Among Kent’s many demonstrated strengths during his Vanderbilt deanship were faculty hiring and retention (with particular success at high-profile lateral hiring), the strengthening of career services, tireless involvement with alumni, and the reinforcement of a scholarly culture among faculty. Oh, and did I mention that he is himself a master teacher who writes and speaks on that subject for law school audiences across the country? As I look back over the progress of this institution, I can predict with confidence that we’re about to go three for three.

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