After defending four fellow students threatened with expulsion at his undergraduate university, Sterling L. Miller, JD ’88, decided to attend law school. It was a good fit. Now he’s executive vice president, general counsel, and corporate secretary for Sabre Holdings, a major transportation technology firm that, among other things, owns Travelocity.com.
As a sophomore at a small university in Nebraska, Sterling Miller got his first taste of the power of the law. He successfully defended four students facing expulsion for holding a keg party in their dormitory.

During a disciplinary hearing, a residential adviser said he had seen the students at a distance of 15 feet drinking beer out of red cups. Like Perry Mason, Miller grabbed an identical red cup and walked 15 feet away from the residential adviser, who could not tell him what was in the cup.

Next, the nervy Miller pointed out that teachers and administrators judging the students hadn’t followed the required hearing process set out in the school handbook. In particular, the students received no summary of charges against them.

“You could see faces of administrators turn white when they realized they screwed up,” Miller recalled recently. After two to three hours of private deliberation, the administrators exonerated the students.

The hearing affected Miller profoundly. “Closely reading the handbook, figuring out how to approach the problem, helping other people solve their problems—everything about it, I just naturally gravitated to and just loved,” he says. “That was probably when I made the decision I was going to law school.”

Today Miller is executive vice president, general counsel, and corporate secretary for Sabre Holdings. The Dallas-Ft. Worth firm owns numerous companies, including Travelocity.com, which employ approximately 10,000 people in 59 countries. The companies provide technology enabling airlines, travel agents, and corporations to process nearly 45,000 travel-related transactions a second.

“We’re the world’s largest processor of travel reservations. That is the heart and soul of our company,” says Sterling. “When you make a travel reservation, there’s a tremendous amount of stuff that goes on behind the scenes. And we’re that stuff.”

The company’s technology extends deeply into three areas. The Sabre computer network allows airlines, travel agents, corporations, and other travel suppliers to make travel reservations. Meanwhile company software and hosting systems enable airlines to, among other things, schedule crews, manage their gates, and improve efficiency generally. A third line of business focuses on major litigation and contracts.

The lawyers’ work is varied. “We have a traditional legal function, involving contracts, litigation, employment issues, etc.,” Miller says. “I also have the corporate secretarial function, which involves the board of directors and maintaining the company’s licenses and corporate structure.”

Other work includes enforcing the company’s business ethics policy and compliance programs. The government affairs office and the people responsible for data privacy matters also report to Miller.

“I try to instill in my team a lot of autonomy,” Miller says. “I like to think I’ve hired smart, capable people. If they need my help, they can always get it, which makes for a lot of interesting phone calls at odd times. Singapore, for example, is 13 hours ahead of us.”

In addition to overseeing his staff, Miller spends extensive time counseling Sabre’s CEO and other executives. He also focuses on major litigation and contracts.

He can juggle responsibilities in part because law school taught him to prioritize. “You get hundreds of pages to read a night from different classes,” he says. “If you try to do everything, you just get overwhelmed. So you have to develop a skill of figuring out what’s really important, what do I really need to know, and what am I going to be tested on?”

Mastering the skills of prioritizing and getting to the heart of the issue, Miller was named to what was then the Washington University Journal of Urban and Contemporary Law and graduated Order of the Coif. His law school record led to a job with the St. Louis firm of Gallop, Johnson & Neuman. In 1994 he moved to Dallas-Ft. Worth to join the legal department of American Airlines. His responsibilities included work for a technology subsidiary called Sabre.

In 2000 Sabre became an independent company, and Miller joined its legal team. Then in 2004, he became senior vice president and general counsel for Travelocity.com, a Sabre company, and in 2008 returned to Sabre to assume his current position.

The hardest part of his present job, Miller says, is the time demands. “When you’re the general counsel, you are the focus of the legal department for the executives of the company,” he says. “When they are working, you are working. When they need something, it doesn’t matter where they are in the world or what time it is. It’s up to you to figure out how to solve the problem.”

However, Miller says the best part is that every day is different. “There’s always something really interesting or new for the legal department to deal with,” he says. “If you are like me and like that type of challenge, there isn’t a better place to be.”