



1999

## Thanks, But I'm Just Looking : Or Why I Don't Want to Be a Dean

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### Original Citation

Susan J. Becker, Thanks, But I'm Just Looking: Or Why I Don't Want to Be a Dean, 49 *Journal of Legal Education* 595 (1999)

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# HEINONLINE

Citation: 49 J. Legal Educ. 595 1999

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# Thanks, But I'm Just Looking: Or, Why I Don't Want to Be a Dean

Susan J. Becker

I recently spent three years serving as associate dean at the law school where I've taught since 1990. My portfolio included helping to coordinate the scheduling of more than 100 classes each semester, managing and supporting some eighty adjuncts, overseeing clinical and externship programs, championing the interests of the one-third of our students who are enrolled in the part-time program, supervising the pro bono/public interest program, serving as a liaison between the administration and a plethora of student organizations and faculty committees, and creating the school's bimonthly newsletter and supervising its production.

The challenges inherent in the position have been exhilarating and exhausting, fascinating and frustrating. Today, on the eve of returning to the faculty, I can summarize my feelings in five short words: Get me out of here!

Despite my sentiment du jour, I do not regret having spent thirty-six months on the dark side, as faculty typically characterize law school administration. There were many benefits: I laughed, I cried, I had a ball. I am compelled to write this essay, however, to offer a bit of insight on why some law school deans burn out faster than cheap votive candles. It is also a shot fired across the bow of faculty considering a tour of duty in administration—not intended to completely discourage, but merely to give fair warning of trouble ahead.

## Making the Right Choice for One Valid and Two Stupid Reasons

Why would any member of a law faculty trade a comfortable life of teaching, scholarship, and minimal administrative responsibility for a life of administrative drudgery, very little teaching, and virtually no time for scholarship? In my case, I accepted the "promotion" to associate dean for two conscious reasons that seemed valid at the time and one powerful motivation lurking in my subconscious. Now, with hindsight, I see all three reasons in a whole new light. And the more accurate view is not flattering.

First, as associate dean I would be able to survey the landscape of legal academe from a better vantage point and make a fully informed decision about a possible career in administration.

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Journal of Legal Education, Volume 49, Number 4 (December 1999)

Second, no one else wanted the job. Having been raised on equal parts of suffering and guilt (i.e., as a Roman Catholic), I found it almost genetically impossible to pass up an opportunity to play the martyr.

The final reason, now painfully clear, was a hyperactive ego that infused my gray matter with delusions of grandeur. It also obscured my vision of some of the most basic realities of law school life—like faculty governance—and led me to believe that I could attain virtually any goal I set for myself and the institution.

To put it more specifically, I was cognitively aware that law faculty cry “Foul!” if the brand of coffee creamer in the lounge is changed without six months of consensus building and a supermajority faculty vote. Nevertheless, I naively expected to make revolutionary improvements in the curriculum, establish a more equitable faculty workload distribution, and revise other major policies and procedures within the first year or so on the job. And I believed I could continue to produce quality scholarship and be a good teacher while masterminding this revolution.

What *was* I thinking?

Three years after accepting the associate deanship for these now-dubious reasons, I have a new, more realistic perspective:

- No one should see how laws and sausages are made or how institutions of higher learning are run.
- Martyrdom is overrated.
- Egos are fragile creatures, and a dean’s office is not the ideal environment in which to nurture one.

From a few offhand comments, I know that some of my colleagues believe that the administrator’s salary also provided a strong motivation for my accepting the associate deanship. To them I respond: do the math.

After my first six months on the job, I did some rough calculations comparing the increase in pay to the increase in hours worked. The rate of return from the associate dean’s pot of gold was marginally higher than the hourly rate for a night-shift manager at a McDonald’s. And McDonald’s has some additional benefits, like food that is more wholesome than anything found in a law school vending machine when you’re burning the midnight computer monitor.

### **The Prince, the Pauper, and Nancy Drew**

A significant amount of culture shock accompanied my move from faculty to administration. Perhaps the one that caught me most off guard was the change in people’s reactions to me.

Having lived most my life as the Pauper, I had suddenly become the Prince. Colleagues who previously wouldn’t have bothered to throw a glass of water on me if my hair were on fire immediately began soliciting my advice on matters great and small. Overnight I became an expert on issues ranging from selection of course materials (whether or not I had ever taught the particular course) to best vacation spots in Australia (which I’ve only visited via the TV travel channel).

Another misconception among my faculty colleagues is that princely powers were bestowed on me as I ascended the associate dean throne. The only throne-related power I ever exercised occurred on a Saturday morning. As the lone administrator in the law school building, I was called upon by several students to resolve a crisis in one of the women's restrooms: no toilet paper. Although my master key did not allow me access to the janitors' supply closet (every hierarchy draws the line somewhere), I was sufficiently emboldened by my associate dean title to enter a men's restroom and immediately effect a more equitable redistribution of resources. It was a heady moment.

While some colleagues seemed in awe of my newfound wisdom and power, others whom I'd long considered friends became suspicious of my motives. A few exhibited behavior bordering on paranoia. Conversations hushed or changed focus when I entered the room. It was as if I were Nancy Drew investigating the *Alien in the Classroom* mystery.

I can best illustrate my point with typical morning conversations around the faculty lounge coffee pot *before* and *after* the associate dean title started following me around like a little black cloud.

#### BEFORE

Me: So how are you doing today? You look a little tired.

*Colleague: Yeah, I am. Stayed up to watch the whole Indians game last night—went to twelve innings. It was worth it though—they pulled it out with a grand slam.*

Sounds like a great game. Gotta get to a meeting—see you later.

OK.

#### AFTER

Me: So how are you doing today? You . . .

*Colleague: Why do you ask?*

Well, you look a little tired, and . . .

*No, I'm not tired! Did someone tell you I've been tired? Did my students tell you I look tired?*

No, no, really, it's no big deal. I just . . .

*Did you mention this to the dean? Does he think I look tired?*

No . . . really. I gotta run—I'm late for a meeting.

*Maybe I should send the dean an e-mail about this . . .*

OK, whatever . . . I gotta run. I'm late for a meeting.

*Is it with the dean?*

#### Coping with a Real Job

Folks in the Ivory Tower are habitually accused of being out of touch with the real world. My former law firm colleagues have frequently referred to my own transition from practitioner to professor as "the great escape." I used to bristle at such comments and assume a tone of righteous indignation as I detailed the daunting demands of being a law professor.

"I work really hard," I would say. "I teach Civil Procedure to students who think Ally McBeal realistically represents the practice of law. I have to produce prolific cutting-edge scholarship. I have significant committee assignments. I am active in numerous academic and professional associations. Blah blah blah woof woof woof."

I delivered my soapbox performance with great conviction before I became an associate dean. But three years of deaning took some of the air out of my standard response to any suggestion that I should "get a real job."

The fact is, becoming an associate dean was a harsh reentry into the real world. The parallels between associate deaning and practicing law in a big firm were astonishing. The contrasts between being an associate dean and being a regular faculty member were equally profound.

Just as in practice, I had to keep track of vacation and sick days; had to deal with the political realities of never being able to please everyone who came to me advocating a cause or seeking a remedy for a real or imagined injury; had to be physically present at work many more hours than any brand of pantyhose would comfortably accommodate; worked a good portion of most weekends; attended meeting after meeting during which my To Do list grew while my time to address existing items was voraciously consumed; generated volumes of written communications ranging from short memos to multivolume manuals and reports; became frighteningly dependent on voicemail, e-mail, fax machines, and—a sure sign of administrative dementia—a Palm Pilot electronic organizer; and began viewing weekends and holidays as workdays without secretarial support.

Perhaps the most telling sign that I had taken the entrance ramp to the wrong career highway occurred when faculty and students started returning after a five-week Christmas holiday and asked me, "So how was your break?"

My candid response: "What break?"

### Getting Things Done

My grandiose plan for revitalizing the law school in 365 days or less immediately hit a small snag known as faculty governance. For those unfamiliar with the term, faculty governance is frequently defined as letting the inmates run the asylum. This is how it works.

Faculty governance entitles faculty members to significant or even decisive input in virtually every decision made at the law school. The exceptions to the rule are those matters that do not interest the faculty. Accordingly, the line between matters requiring faculty input and those which administrators may resolve unilaterally is even less clear than the application of *Pennoyer v. Neff* to cyberspace transactions.

Faculty governance leaves law school administrators with two equally odious choices when determining whether a particular matter requires consultation with faculty. One option is to make a decision, and then endure the wailing and gnashing of teeth by faculty who claim the administration has trespassed on their sacred ground. The other option is to ask for faculty input in the first instance, thereby guaranteeing a minimum of six months' delay in

reaching a final resolution. This second option is inevitably accompanied by a faculty critique that the administration isn't moving the law school forward quickly enough. Not surprisingly, those of us who have spent any time on the dark side often begin to view faculty governance in the same way we would respond to a suggestion that Dom DeLuise be assigned to guard the Twinkies.

It would, of course, be disingenuous to blame all of my frustrations on faculty governance. Any institutional setting entails multiple levels of bureaucracy and red tape and requires a Houdini to accomplish relatively simple tasks. My law school, as one of seven colleges of an urban university, is caught in a classic Catch-22. University leaders exhort the law school to create its own unique identity, which can be leveraged into greater academic recognition as well as development dollars. But the law school is not allowed to color outside any of the university's lines. Indeed, a common response by university officials to any law school proposal is "If we let you do X, then the other colleges will want to do X." So we are constantly striving to distinguish ourselves by moving in lockstep with everyone else. I am the only one seeing the irony here?

### Coming to My Senses

At several critical junctures in my life, I have stopped to take an accounting of my personal, professional, and spiritual life and to compare the person I am with the person I aspire to be. Although the "who I want to be when I grow up" is an ever-moving target, I have currently set my sights on a spot somewhere between Mother Teresa and Xena, Warrior Princess. Nurturing, yet appropriately fierce. Spiritually inspired, yet reality based.

Unfortunately, the pairing of my core personality with the demands of being an associate dean produced a being more akin to Attila the Hun. My sense of humor packed up and left, leaving in its stead the sort of sarcasm that passes for wit only in circles frequented by fans of Leona Helmsly. My ability to realize that other people have valuable viewpoints and ideas was replaced with a recurring thought that almost became a mantra: "What the hell is wrong with these people anyway?" The once-positive trait of being mildly obsessive about the quality of my work started consuming me, often awakening me at three in the morning to ask questions like "You *did* drop that package in the overnight delivery box before you left work, *didn't* you?"

After much reflection, I could see that there were many ways to cope with the demands of life as a law school administrator. Unfortunately, many of those that came to mind—like slapping students and colleagues who weren't carrying out their responsibilities to my satisfaction—were not likely to advance my career.

So, after six years as a law teacher and another three as associate dean, I saw two alternatives. I could pursue a career in law school administration, openly embracing the reality that the job is virtually overwhelming, frequently thankless, and not likely to stimulate production of brilliant (or even marginally acceptable) scholarship. Or I could return to the faculty, devote most of my time to teaching and writing, and artfully dodge administrators desperately seeking to delegate work to faculty.

**Which option would you choose?**

**I appreciate the opportunities provided by my law school to try my hand at deaning. I also appreciate the indications from other law schools that I might continue my career in administration. But, at least for now, I think you'll understand my standard response:**

**Thank you, but I'm just looking.**