Commentary

*Peter Alexander*†

Good morning, everyone. I am Peter Alexander from Southern Illinois, and I realized that I have two things in common with Professor Rennard Strickland, who preceded me today. First, Rennard is one of my predecessor deans at Southern Illinois University. Second, like Rennard, I hated law school. I hated everything about law school; I hated the way we did it, the people who did it, and the people with whom I did it. I just hated everything about it. However, during the last week of my third year, one of my professors, Judy Brown, came to me and said, “I see you doing this someday.” I thought she was absolutely crazy. So, if some of you think you will never be a dean, or would hate to be a dean, do not dismiss it, because you never know. There are a lot of people who will give you helpful tips and encouragement. Think about the things that people are saying to you because you are here and you are interested. Your colleagues probably have told you that you should be here and you should be doing this. I want to encourage you to do it because, even if you think you cannot or should not do it, or would hate to do it, there might be a school out there for you. That is really the taking off point for me.

The school I am at happens to be my undergraduate alma mater. I had the most wonderful four years of my life as an undergrad at Southern Illinois University; I loved it so much that I graduated in three years. I ran for student body president as a third-year student, and I won. The interim university president at that time was a man named Hiram Lesar. Hiram was the interim president, but he was best known for being founding dean of the school of law. He was also my mentor.

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1 Professor Rennard Strickland served as a professor and dean of Southern Illinois University School of Law from 1990–1995. Recently, Professor Strickland was named the 2007–2008 Fletcher Jones Distinguished Visiting Professor at Law at the Chapman University School of Law.

2 Professor Hiram H. Lesar served as dean of the Southern Illinois University School of Law from its founding in 1972 until his retirement in 1980.
When the deanship at Southern Illinois became available, many of my colleagues encouraged me to think about doing it. I went through the process, and I think a couple of things helped me. I loved the school; I loved the experience. My mentor was the founding dean of the law school, and it just all fit; I thought I was uniquely situated for the position. Through the process, I kept saying that I am applying for one job, at one school, and it is my school. That was my theme throughout. If you can find a connection with the school you are applying to and stay on message, people will begin to talk to one another about that throughout your interview process. By the time I got to the later groups, they all said that they realized I was coming back home to my alma mater and that it was wonderful. The message precedes the messenger after a while. The provost at the time said he would like the law school to be more integrated into the life of the university. It was perceived as being on the fringe, different and apathetic towards getting involved. There were little things that irked the university; for example, we have a university homecoming and the law school had something called a fall gathering that was always on a non-football weekend. They were just little things and I kept thinking, “Oh, how hard can this be?”

One of the things you usually have to do during the interview process is speak about what your goals are with the school and how you will lead. The school sent me materials stating that they wanted to be regarded as among the best small public law schools in America, and I just thought that I would play off of that. I created my PowerPoint slides in an architectural font and used architectural images, calling it “Building the Best Public Law School in America.” I said, “Why settle for being regarded among the best? Why shouldn’t we try to be the best?” That was my theme for my campus visit.

During my visit, I noticed that the law school was not a very diverse community. There was only one African American faculty member and only three percent of the student body was of color. This is at a university that is twenty percent diverse and had African Americans in their first class in 1869. The law school was completely different in its kind of ethos. You might know that World Church creator Matt Hale\(^3\) was one of Southern Illinois Law’s alums. We were probably better known as being a school that catered to Matt Hale-type students rather than catering to progressive students. The law school had two African

\(^3\) Matt Hale is the leader of a well-known white supremacist group known as the World Church, now referred to as the “Creativity Movement.” He was sentenced to a 40-year prison term in 2005 for soliciting an undercover FBI agent to kill a federal judge. Hale graduated from Southern Illinois University School of Law in May 1998.
American women who went to the final round of a national moot court competition; a Chicago newspaper ran a story about their success. I saw the article, and I worked it into my thirty-five minute presentation; I spoke about thirty seconds on diversity and how we have to do better. One thing off the top of my head that I suggested to them was to run a picture of the two women along with the story. The publicity of these African American women might have motivated a whole group of African Americans and women to come to this law school where these women had success. That was the end of it. I went on with the rest of the presentation about building the best public law school.

Later that afternoon, I was doing my interviews (the one-on-two and one-on-three interviews) and I met with a group of three men who brought me into one of their offices, closed the door, and expressed real concerns about my candidacy. Their concern was that I was going to be the “diversity dean.” Because of my thirty-second talk about diversity, they were afraid that I was going to cram it down their throats. This was a wake-up call; I was not Dorothy going back to Oz; rather, I was in a place that had challenges that we needed to think about.

I later learned that we had several faculty members who never visited other law schools and had very little interaction with visitors coming in. Also, many of the senior faculty had been there since Hiram Lesar started the law school. Hiram had been the dean at Washington University in St. Louis and brought all the rules from Washington over to Southern Illinois when the school was started. We had rules on our books that Washington University no longer had on their books about the way in which you operate a law school. However, we had so few people who had different ideas about how to do faculty rules and faculty governance that we were not getting infused with exciting people and exciting visions.

I also found that you have to be conversant in all areas of the law. You do not have to be an associate dean to be a dean, but being an associate dean helps you see how the physical plan operation works. You see student affairs, you see faculty relations, you see development, you interact with the American Bar Association (ABA) and the Association of American Law Schools (AALS); those kinds of things help. Being on an AALS inspection team or an ABA inspection team also gives you that kind of exposure. You need to talk to a lot of different people as you go through the interview process. People will take you in a lot of different directions and they will hope that you will be able to understand what the librarians’ latest concerns are; what the clinicians’ latest concerns are;
and what students of color are concerned about. Those kinds of things are very important.

The other challenge is identifying what you are going to bring to the school. What are your specific distinguishable skills? A friend expressed to me that the faculty knew I was a Saluki who loves the university, but the faculty wanted to know what was special about me. I thought long and hard, and answered that I would help the faculty to transform the school into what they wanted it to be. I did not say that I was going to take them to the next level, and I did not describe myself as the boss.

Instead, I think of myself as the head cheerleader in charge. I said that I would use the relationships that I had with fellow deans, the AALS, the ABA, and the knowledge that I have gained to help get the faculty to where they wanted to be. I could do this because I had owned my own law office and I had hired and fired people, and I am a bankruptcy lawyer by training, so I can read a budget. That is pretty much all I said about my skill set. But to this day, in my fifth year as dean, people remind me that I said that I would help them get where they want to be based on the fact that I could hire and fire people and could read a budget.

Let me tell you about the rewards that I think come from this experience, and then I will end the story as I began talking about my school. My skill set matched the needs of the law school at the right time in its history. Alone, I have done nothing in particular, but, together, we are doing some really good things. One of the things I am most proud of is that my faculty is beginning to realize that we are doing some really good things. We have less wringing of our hands and saying we are not the University of Illinois, we are not St. Louis University or any of our neighboring schools; instead, we say that we are Southern Illinois University and we have a lot to be proud of. I am proud of my colleagues for doing that.

The other thing I have tried to introduce to them is transparency in everything that we do. We are a state school, so being open to the public is very important. For example, we changed the way we do end reviews. I followed a dean who was generally liked; however, some people were frustrated by the way he decided raises. What we have chosen to do is lay out the faculty expectations consistently with ABA standard 404. I told the faculty, you decide what your expectations of one another will be, and I will enforce them. Then I will sit down and review everyone’s

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4. Southern Illinois’ mascot is named after a breed of dog, the Saluki.
annual achievement report. I sit down in the faculty member’s office, and we go over teaching, service, and scholarship. We discuss whether that person is exceeding our expectations, meeting our expectations, or not meeting our expectations. As difficult as it is, a faculty member deserves to hear from me that they are not meeting our expectations before they read it in the annual review letter; I have had to say that to some people. Then we send the annual review letters out, there is a grievance period, and we set raises. I tell the faculty that the raises are based on these categories and give them the formula, so everyone knows what the raise is before they get the raise. This way, people just feel like they are more a part of the process.

We have also built a community, and it has taken some time. I have had to counsel some people off of the tenure tract, we have had to move some people into retirement against their will, and we have had to ask some people to re-examine their priorities or face moving toward retirement or more drastic measures. I think my colleagues feel that everyone knows what is expected. Most of us are working hard, and the people who are not are now the outliers. As one of my colleagues put it, the folks off the bell curve are not getting a free ride anymore. This is a community that has come together, declared expectations, and obtained somebody who can help them reach those expectations.

I am very proud of what we are doing. We are in our second year of self-study for our ABA inspection, which is next October. Without one bit of rancor or dissent, we have been in study mode where we have examined just about everything. In no conversation that we have had has anyone said this is my personal thing; you are now in my space. So, together, we have come to a good place. Having said that, I am personally very unhappy in my job right now, and I will take you back to the beginning of the story.

I believe that my university is in distress. Our chancellor (who is our campus officer) and our president (who is our system officer) have both been embroiled in plagiarism controversies. We just finished four dean searches, and we have two more to go. I am on my third chancellor in five years, my second provost to my second president. Enrollment has, inexplicably, been on the decline. It is a very distressing time for

someone who went back to his alma mater to give back. I have been caught up in what is happening to my alma mater, and it is very difficult to be the dean of this relatively young but growing law school at a place that is struggling. So even when you go back for the right reasons, you might find that the challenges are still very great.