I am honored and delighted to have been asked to speak at this conference, more especially so because I am no longer a sitting dean. It is gratifying to see a number of dear friends and even more inspiring to see the number of you who are interested in pursuing deanships. The task of dean-ing will challenge and reward you like no other position in the academy. Before I begin, let me thank Dean Kellye Testy and the Seattle University School of Law for hosting an event focused on people of color and women, historic minorities in legal education leadership positions.

As a former Dean, I have the luxury of talking a bit more frankly than some of the people you will hear today. You see, every “how-to” session needs an example of what-not-to-do. I am that person—the good, the bad, and the unusual have all been a part of my experience as Dean and will likely be part of anyone who chooses to go down this path. For the next few minutes, I hope to talk about how one might navigate some of these inevitably difficult waters.

Let me begin by noting that, for the most part, the rewards for your labor as Dean come after you step down. Although the average tenure for a law Dean has increased over the past few years, the length of time is still a bit less than five years. In such a short time, a law dean does not remain in office long enough to see her recruited faculty advance through their careers to tenure. Strategic plans frequently take a few years to develop and even more time to bear fruit. Five or six years as Dean simply does not give one enough time to make the impact that most of us dream about when we become candidates for such a post. All of us of course, know the stories of those remarkable women and men who serve with

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1 W.H. (Joe) Knight is Professor of Law and Dean Emeritus at the University of Washington School of Law. Knight served as Dan of the Law School from 2001 through 2007. Prior to coming to Washington, Knight served as Vice Provost of the University of Iowa from 1997 to 2000.
distinction for seven, ten, or even fifteen years. By almost every account, those people should be, and are, acclaimed as great successes. They have toiled long enough to see curriculums change; young faculty become recognized experts in their fields; alumni grow to love their alma mater even more than they did as students; and, plans (whether fund-raising, capital construction, or strategic goals) become realities. Indeed, most law schools acknowledged as top-tier institutions have had the experience of a long-sitting dean who has helped their law schools develop and evolve. Unfortunately, most deans do no stay in their positions long enough to experience a cultural change/evolution in their institutions. So, let me begin by asking, why do we have this relatively short revolving door?

A. Mismatched Expectations

The first explanation centers on your reasons for seeking a deanship one of my closest mentors was David Vernon, a former law school Dean and AALS President. When I was first asked to consider entering a dean search, I went to David to discuss the flattering fact that someone might be interested in my serving as dean. His response caught me a bit by surprise, “why do you want to be a dean?” He offered no encouragement, no congratulations, only a simple-yet-difficult question. I told him that I thought there were things in legal education that I wanted like to see take place and that I thought one would be better situated to achieve those things from the position of dean. He received my answer with a wry smile and said, “That is precisely why you should want to be dean.” There should be no other reason for your seeking a deanship—not status, not pay, and certainly not any sense of entitlement (whether by scholarly achievement or, by the mere passage of time). If you do not have a burning desire to make legal education better, stronger, then you should never seek the job. I have always thought that this was the most important piece of advice that I, or anyone could be given. The job of dean is filled with extraordinary responsibility and few thanks. Think long and think carefully about whether you want to pursue it.

A second and equally important expectation-mismatch is the one that exists between dean candidate and law school. When you choose to become a candidate, do so only after exhaustive research about the institution, its history, culture, and environment. Ask yourself whether you

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1. Professor David Vernon served more than thirty years on the faculty of the University of Iowa Law School; he then served as Associate Dean at the University of Washington School of Law.
2. The Association of American Law Schools (AALS).
would be a good fit at a particular school. Many candidates see law schools as fungibles—blank canvases from which to create a masterpiece. Nothing could be further from the truth. Law schools have different structures, different missions, different personalities, and, different personas. While a dean candidate should certainly interview by discussing all of the things she or he would like to see done in a school, the candidate should also spend interview time learning more about the institution’s culture. Can they work with you, and can you work with them? I believe that the failure to become culturally and environmentally knowledgeable is a principal reason we see short-lived deanships.

A third explanation for mismatched expectations is what I call, denial and delusion. Too often, dreams for the school fail to match the realities of the school or those of the new dean. How can an organization become successful when parties are not on the same page? Even worse, how can a school move forward when the people in that school deny their shortcomings? Institutions typically cite goals such strengthening the school’s scholarly profile; improving school rankings and bar passage numbers; raising the profiles of entering law students; or, placing more graduates in prestigious judicial and law firm clerkships, are the goals of nearly every law school. However, those stated goals frequently encounter the realities—insufficient resources to support, sustain, and expand faculty scholarship and research; the difficulties of moving up in law school rankings without those additional resources (or, too few faculty members pursuing innovative teaching and provocative scholarship); faculty resistance to taking on more responsibilities for teaching and research (especially when bar passage results are an issue); fierce competition among schools for the highest profiled students; and, limited placement opportunities for the increasingly large number of law school graduates each year. When the Dean is unable to persuade the Provost that the law school needs more, not fewer dollars, or, when the Dean is not as successful in raising outside gift and grant dollars, many quickly abandon their support for the dean’s new vision. As faculty and staff members, we find explanations for our existing approaches, or reasons for not trying a new initiative.

Some schools simply deny the changed behaviors and hard work needed to achieve their goals. Instead, those schools blame the dean and then seek a new dean. Coming to terms with the cultural makeup of a law school is the central task for a dean. Without that type of realistic assessment of the law school environment, the dean can become discouraged about the speed with which institutional change takes place, and thus affect decanal longevity. As an aside, I believe that law schools are
also far more comfortable with maintaining the status quo than with affecting real change in the ways they operate. Sure, we say we want a new dean to be a change agent for the school; but, when the process of creating a new environment individually and collectively demands that we change our behaviors as a school community, the environment can quickly turn less welcoming. Once again, this type of mismatched expectation discourages longevity.

B. So Many Jobs

Even when a dean succeeds in the above arenas, the dean’s support of particular initiatives can be seen as favoring one or more members of a faculty over others. Whenever that situation develops, unhealthy competition can be fueled by petty jealousies. Thus, as Dean, your job becomes one of counselor and psychologist. How do you help your colleagues to see their contributions as ones to the collective effort? How do you help them to think institutionally rather than personally? This task is one that several candidates do not consider when entering a dean search.

Another under-considered aspect of dean-ing is dealing with external constituencies. When John Sexton, the current president of NYU, served as dean of the law school, he used to give a talk to new law deans informing them that “your job as dean is a job as a myth-builder.” I cannot imagine a better statement to describe the task of dean. You are a myth-builder. Not only do you have to talk about the truth of the school’s current situation, but you must also inspire your colleagues (students, staff, faculty, alumni, university administration, regents, trustees, and members of the bench and bar) that they have a role in promoting the school’s mission of encouraging justice. Perhaps more importantly, the dean must also create the myth that the school is better than what it is already. You are to help build a myth of continued growth and progress and then re-build that myth into a newer, bigger, and even better myth as your school progresses. While I hope that there are more truths than fictions in each myth, the plain fact is that mythic perception is as real a part of your job as dean as balancing your budget.

Another task for the dean is managerial skill. This is a particularly important and challenging job given that your toolkit is minimal at best. Most of us are academics, untrained and ill equipped to manage people and organizations. Moreover, the tenure system in Universities makes

3. The author is referring to John Edward Sexton, who became the president of New York University in 2001.
traditional employer-employee relations, even for non-tenured faculty or staff members difficult to operate, let alone to demand accountability. While deans arguably have the power to hire, restructuring, firing or demanding accountability is a much more difficult thing to achieve. Manager, counselor, psychologist, and marketer, these are just some of the jobs required of you as a dean, which takes me back to David Vernon’s question, “why the heck would you want to be a dean?”

C. Interviewing

Assuming that you have not yet been frightened away by my observations, what do search committees really want in a dean candidate when you get fortunate enough to get to that round of four, six or eight candidates to visit a school? I believe that most committees do not know what they want when they are looking for dean candidate. What most will tell you is, “we really want is someone who walks on water,” the Jim Chen sort of dean.

We have expectations of the dean candidate. Every expectation from every constituent group you meet will be different. For most of us who are faculty members, our first question for any dean candidate is, “Are you a scholar?” The real question is, “Are you smarter than me, because if you are then I might have some issues. You must be smart, so what have you produced?” For students, and even for some faculty, they ask, “Are you a good teacher? Could I see myself in your classroom, and do you inspire or excite me?” For some faculty members, principally those asking the first question, that is also an important question to ask.

For the administration, and some alumni, their questions are, “Are you a visionary? Are you someone I will be willing to go into battle and follow? Are you a leader? Are you someone who has a real idea about what and where we can take this law school?” For so many administrators, the questions are, “Are you a good manager? What do you know about university administration? Can you effectively influence or lead a nest of independent, intellectual butterflies, also known as faculty?”

Other colleagues and constituents are important. Management is critical to those who are not faculty members or students. The staff is so important. You cannot do your job as a dean unless you have a great staff. It does not mean that you have only great faculty staff as vice-team or associate deans. You must have support staff, those administrative staff people. Questions that you should make a point to ask are, “What are some of these staff members’ ideas? What are some of their frustrations? What are some of their difficulties?” How well do you listen? How creative are you in addressing the concerns of others?
As a candidate, you should keep in mind outside members of the search committee. Virtually every search committee has an outside member or set of outside members who are outside the law school. They may include the members of the university, alumni, a member of the bench, or a member of the bar. These people will also ask a couple of questions. They are looking at your “sales persona.” Do you come off like a used-car salesperson or the myth-builder that John Sexton talks about? Are you sincere in your beliefs and earnest in your actions? Is your enthusiasm for addressing the challenges of the school infectious and inspiring? Are you perceived as someone who can convince other people to join in the venture that is building a law school?

The business community will ask a similar but separate set of questions. Sometimes we do not talk about the communities, and we only talk about the bench and the bar. I believe that is a great mistake. You have to talk about the bench, the bar, the business community, and the public interest communities for starters. You will be expected to be able to speak to university events beyond the law school, be they sports or interdisciplinary collaborations. Heaven forbid if you are a person of color or a woman. You have to talk with and about those communities. There are multiple paths you must traverse to become an effective dean. If you are a woman, add every women’s organization to your list. This is true for everyone who seeks the job of dean. It is simply more acute if you are a woman or minority.

You have to ask yourselves some important questions when some of these outside people interview you. For example, take the members of the public interest community. Not only are they looking to see if you are not in the same place as they are, but they will also ask you, “how are you going to deal with a particularly difficult situation? How are you going to appear before the media?” Greg Williams, former dean at the Ohio State University School of Law and currently president of The City University of New York reports that he stands whenever he conducts an interview with the media. He stands up even when speaking on the telephone. He stands because he believes that standing makes him respond more quickly and formally to questions. He believes that he is more careful with what he says and more succinct because he does not want to stand for a long time and talk. In both Greg’s and my experience, the one line you mis-speak while sitting when talking to the media, is likely going to be the line that gets published. Thus, brevity is a policy worth pursuing when dealing with the media.

A related second interviewing tip--remember that more is less. The more you want to impress, the less you have to do. You have to be your-
self when you go to these interviews. You cannot deny who you are as a human being, as a person. You cannot deny your own sense of self, and the search committee needs to understand that. Many of us are engaged in over-preparation when we go into interviews. We want to know the backgrounds and the biographies of everyone who is on the search committee. Why? You are going to be asked questions about your understanding of and vision for the school. You do not need to know the complete biographies of your interview team. Instead, you need to learn as much as you can about the culture and environment of the school.

Your job as candidate is to tell the committee what you think, to tell them what your vision is. Do not think that you are being interviewed. Instead, go into the interview expecting to interview the members of the interview team. If you go into a session expecting to interview the people who are interviewing you, you will ask all the right questions and likely get a better set of answers. Focus on the single most important question: “Is this a group of people with whom I share common points and with whom I might want to work?” If you do not want to work with that group of people, you do not want to take the job as dean, no matter how enticing.

As I said, I am the example of someone who did not ask all the right questions. I am the one who said, “Give me the hardest, most difficult challenge, and that is the one I want because I like climbing tall mountains.” You say your faculty is difficult? Not a problem. You say you have money issues? Not an issue. You say you want to build a new building? Not a question. You say you need to raise money? No problem. Be careful what you say and for what you ask, you just might get your wish. Instead, search for the right fit and be willing to be patient to find that good match. Prepare yourself for that future opportunity by learning more about university management, budgeting, and human relations. Learn about the culture of the institution and candidly answer the question of whether you are a good fit for that school.

My final piece of advice is that you must be honest with yourself. Why do you want to become a dean and what is it you will bring to the post? Do you have the skills necessary to succeed? Do you have the self-knowledge to know when you should say yes and when you should say good-bye? If you can answer those questions comfortably, and, if you think that you are that special superwoman or a superman, go for it. You are not going to do the job forever. Set goals, work to build coalitions to achieve those goals, assess your progress, and know when to say enough is enough. You are going to do this job for a limited period of time. You hope that you can build upon the confidence of your col-
leagues, but I assure you that at some point, your colleagues will say, “we are not certain we want him or her to continue.” At some point, maybe even before they conclude that, you are going to say, “I am not sure that I want to continue.” It is all right to say, “I have made a contribution and I am ready to step down or too tired to continue.”

There is a wonderful life after one serves as dean and I encourage all of you who wish to seek such a post, to keep in mind the timing for your exiting that very same post. Be honest with yourself about the timing and know that there are some good things after your deanship—lower blood pressure, a happier life partner, and, lots more smiles. Be careful in deciding whether to go into the job, expect the unusual and the unexpected while in the job, and, have an honest exit strategy for when it is time to leave the post.

Becoming dean is the most exhilarating job I can think of in a university. It is also the hardest job on campus. I wish every one of you all the best in making the right decisions for you and for the schools you choose to interview.