CHIEF COOK AND BOTTLEWASHER: DEANS OF STUDENTS THROUGH THE GENERATIONS

There may be no more complex—and rewarding—job in the Law School than that of the Dean of Students. The Office of the Dean of Students handles everything from student organizations to disciplinary actions, from counseling students to overseeing the Registrar’s Office, from Coffee Mess to graduation. And each of the 650-odd students he or she counsels has no idea what’s been going on with the others, so the Dean of Students must be as bright eyed for the last appointment of the day as for the first.

For the first half-century of the Law School’s existence, the title of Dean of Students was held by a professor as part of his faculty duties. Since then, the job—and the student body—has changed a great deal. We asked four alumni who have served (or are serving) as Dean of Students in different eras to share their views on this demanding and rewarding position.

HON. JAMES HORMEL, ’58: Jim clerked for the Illinois Appellate Court, then practiced briefly with Peterson, Lowry, Rall, Barber, and Ross. Jim served as Dean of Students from 1961 to 1967, then moved east to manage family investments and become involved in politics. He moved to San Francisco, became a professional philanthropist, was a member of two United Nations delegations, and served as United States ambassador to Luxembourg from 1999 to 2001.

RICHARD BADGER, ’68: Dick practiced with Schiff Hardin in Chicago before serving his ROTC obligation in Texas and Vietnam. Afterwards he returned to Chicago and, at then-Dean Phil Neal’s request, took over the career services office at the Law School in 1971. When the Dean of Students moved on a year later, Dick assumed that position as well. He stayed Dean of Students, as well as Dean of Admissions, until 1995. He is now the Assistant Dean for Graduate Programs at the Law School.

ELLEN COSGROVE, ’91: Ellen was an investment banker before law school, and afterward practiced at LeBoeuf Lamb (now Dewey & LeBoeuf) for four years. She served as Dean of Students from 1995 to 2004, when she became the Dean of Students at Harvard Law under her old friend from the Chicago faculty, then-Dean Elena Kagan.

AMY M. GARDNER, ’02: Amy spent more than five years as a litigation associate at Skadden Arps in Chicago, then was a litigation associate and partner at Ungaretti & Harris. She has been Dean of Students since August 2010.

To show that everything around here comes full circle, each of our panelists is connected to another—Jim was Dick’s Dean of Students, Dick was Ellen’s, and Ellen was Amy’s. Dick admitted Amy to the Law School, and Amy was in the same Law School graduating class as Jim’s granddaughter, Heather.
As I started to go back through my life and think about the patterns and the things that really attracted me, I realized that when I was in college and in law school, I was much more engaged in the enterprise outside the classroom, making the place work, creating community. I thought it would really be great to have a job like this and so I started looking. I was a finalist for a position at Yale and I needed some references, so I started calling the people at Chicago. They said, why don’t you come here.

AMY: I had considered higher education when I was in college and did the things you’re supposed to do to pursue higher ed administration. I was an RA and an assistant hall director, worked in the president’s office, did the admissions tours. When I was in law school I really enjoyed my time here. I really admired Dean Cosgrove, thought she had a great job, and that it would be a lot of fun to get to do. I did a fellowship last spring in Europe and when I came back from that fellowship I felt I wanted to do something that felt more fulfilling than what I was doing at the time. As much as I liked IP litigation, I decided I wanted to do something that seemed fulfilling in a different way. A few professors reached out to let me know that the job was going to be posted and that I should think about applying. It happened to be at the right time so I decided to give it a shot.

MARSHA: What was it like for you to transition from being out of school into this position? What was it like being back here as a professional as opposed to as a student?

JIM: I arrived knowing very little about what I was doing or who I was working with. What I did know was that Edward Levi was in charge. The job of Dean of Students was [then] principally as Director of Admissions and Jo Lucas, who had been Dean of Students in a period in which he was also teaching courses at the Law School and wanted to switch to full-time professor. When the offer was made I was very surprised—it was something I hadn’t considered and when I did, it called up my fantasies about how wonderful it would be to be a part of the academic community.

DICK: I happened to be here working when the then-Dean of Students had left and I had no notion that I really wanted to go back to practicing law. I can’t say that I grew up wanting to be a Dean of Students, but I can say that having been a residential counselor for three years in college and a battalion adjutant in the Army, I had some preparation for it.

ELLEN: When I was in college, I was very involved in student life and got to know the Dean of Students well. I talked to her about what it would be like to become a Dean of Students, but she told me I had to get a PhD in higher education administration. I said, so much for that career, and I moved on. Once I was practicing law, I was intellectually stimulated but I wasn’t emotionally fulfilled.

MARSHA: What made you want to move into law school administration, or, more specifically, into the Dean of Students role?

JIM: At a time when I was feeling that perhaps the practice of law was not for me, I got a call from Dean Edward Levi. He mentioned that he was looking for someone to replace Jo Lucas, who had been Dean of Students in a period in which he was also teaching courses at the Law School and wanted to switch to full-time professor. When the offer was made I was very surprised—it was something I hadn’t considered and when I did, it called up my fantasies about how wonderful it would be to be a part of the academic community.

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Lucas was extremely helpful and generous with his time and that made it a lot easier to transition. Being a part of the academic community was fascinating and it wasn't quite what I expected. I thought maybe it was different and it's not different. People behave the same way in academia as they do world at large, but I had a wonderful time.

**DICK:** As with Jim, the job was much different back then than it is now. You look at the [student services] staff [now] and there must be 15 or 20 people. Back then there was me, there was Ann Barber, who was kind of the registrar. I had a staff of two admissions people and we had one other person in career services and I was responsible for all those things, including financial aid. I like to say that the transaction costs back at that time were essentially zero. Dealing with students once they were here was relatively straightforward. It involved making clear what the rules were. We didn't have anywhere near the number of student activities that have since evolved. The difficulty was dealing with two barriers. The first barrier was dealing with the faculty. Here are people who had taught me a couple of years prior, I was very much in awe of them, and here I am now on a first-name basis with them and working with them. They were very good about that, but it was always difficult in the beginning to accept that I'm treated by them sort of as a colleague, even if it's only as a second-class colleague. Then there's the issue of dealing with students. When I took over I was 28, around the same age as Jim was when he started. I had to be careful to create some barriers between myself and the students because even though I was relatively close to them in age, I was in a different position. I had to administer and apply the rules to them. One difficulty of being a Dean of Students is reaching that right mix between being accessible to the students and understanding them, but at the same time understanding you're not their friend. We all have [had] to work on that relationship, particularly since [we have] all been students here.

**ELLEN:** To have gone from a large, multinational firm where you had 24-hour support to do pretty much anything, to suddenly have a place where you had to wander through dark rooms and figure out how to turn on pieces of equipment, it was just staggering how much longer it took...
JIM: Admissions was my principal activity, but I was also in charge of financial aid and all of the law student records were maintained in our office. I’m happy to say that there were practically no disciplinary matters, but the ones we had were strange. We had a student who was a contrarian, but a very pleasant one. I had the unpleasant duty of telling him that the law school dormitory was for law students and not their mates and he was living with [someone] openly and notoriously. I said you either have to move out or move her out. The next day I was sitting at my desk, which overlooked the back parking lot, and I looked out the window and here comes this guy and this girl. It was the middle of winter, he was barefoot, and they were carrying a bed. That was the last I heard about the cohabitation.

DICK: For me, it depended on what time of year it was. I was on the road doing recruiting activities before a class actually arrived on campus and that was unusual because most schools had already begun classes. In the fall, I spent an awful lot of time doing recruiting visits. Over the Christmas vacation period I spent a lot of time reading applications and then dealing with applicants in the late to get anything done. That was a big culture change. Also, having been a mid-level associate, I was still used to having a fair amount of supervision. If you wrote a memo, it was checked by a senior associate or a partner before it went to the client. I was constantly walking into Douglas [Baird’s] office to show him something before I took action, and he basically said, just go and do it. There was a sense of being dangled out there without much of a safety net, but I really appreciated that. I moved from a position where I was being evaluated by an individual partner to being evaluated by 650 students. You suddenly realize it’s a lot easier to keep one person happy than 650.

AMY: Having been a partner at a law firm, it was definitely an adjustment. Some of that is inherent in making a transition to working in higher education. There’s so much room to make your mark on the student life experience here, which is terrific, but it is a little disconcerting to go from the hierarchy of the law firm and living your life in six-minute increments to a much more fluid environment.

MARSHA: When you were Dean of Students, what was your role? What did a typical day look like?

Then-Dean of Students Ellen Cosgrove, ’91, congratulating students at graduation in 2001.
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**AMY:** This is amazing because I keep feeling exactly the way Ellen just described. I was trying to find a “typical” day. Last Wednesday we had Coffee Mess from 8:30 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. in the Green Lounge. I’m answering student questions and talking with students and faculty and after that we prepared for a wellness fair. Then I met individually with students. That particular Wednesday, I met with students on bar disclosures, designing a new joint-degree program, clerkships, and planning students’ course selections, then dealt with registrar issues. Most days I get here at 9:00 a.m. and I meet with students and respond to things until about 5:00 p.m. or 6:00 p.m., then I finally start what I had planned to do that day.

**MARSHA:** How do you think both the students and the student body have changed over the years?

**ELLEN:** My arrival really marked the big transition in the job, because that’s when we split admissions and the Dean of Students’ job. At the time, time management books started appearing everywhere. They advised you to make a task list for the day. This was exasperating for me because I felt like from the minute I arrived until the minute I left, I didn’t have control, that the students were really in the driver’s seat and the issues I worked on were the issues that students thought were important that day. If there was a student crisis, an issue with a faculty member or a personal issue, I was in the middle of that, so it was very, very hard to predict what the day was going to look like. It would be impossible to say there was a typical day.

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**MARSHA:** How do you think both the students and the student body have changed over the years?
JIM: When I was a law student, almost anybody could get into the law school because the rate of applications was very low at Chicago and at other law schools in the mid-'50s.

DICK: There was one number back then they looked for and that was a 98.6; if you had a warm body, you could get in.

JIM: But by ’61 things were beginning to change and Edward Levi had created the National Honor Scholarships designed to attract the geographically diverse, followed shortly thereafter by Mechem Scholars, which were merit scholarships, trying to draw students with the highest test scores and academic records. The big push in terms of diversity was with women. There were eight female students in the entire law school in 1961. The general absence of women was so noticeable, almost embarrassing. It would have been embarrassing except that’s the way it was at every law school.

DICK: And some law schools didn’t admit women at all.

JIM: By the time I left six years later we had raised the number of women very substantially, but it was still a small minority of the student body. Of course, part of the problem was that, once they graduated, women had no place to go. As Sandra Day O’Connor will tell you, no matter how good you were, law firms simply weren’t hiring. There were administrative jobs and other relatively menial positions which women were obliged to take.

DICK: Well, I was here obviously as Dean of Students for such a long period of time and have been now here since then that I’ve seen a number of dramatic demographic changes. It used to be that the Law School [would] have a bunch of men and there was an organization called the Wives Club for their spouses. The emergence of professional women was a big change, not just in law school, but also in business and medical schools. For a period of time we had a cohort of older women who had graduated from college, had taken jobs or gotten married and raised kids, and then wanted to come to law school when they saw that the places were more hospitable to them. For awhile, the women in the Law School were older [on average] than the men. With minorities, it was the same thing. You began to see many more Latinos and African Americans coming from the typical undergraduate feeder schools and showing an interest in going to law school, but the big difference and the one that people don’t really talk about very much is the emergence of the Asian student. When I talked to some of our students about this they would say, look, my family wanted me to be an engineer or a doctor. It was only over a period of time, maybe moving into a second or third generation, that we began to see a large number of Asian students here. Now, of course, they’re very much a presence.

ELLEN: If you go back to when I was a student, [in] our class the percentage of women was in the high 20s; we hadn’t hit 30 percent yet, and we had one Asian student in our class. There was no such thing as either the Asian Law
Students Association or the Latino Law Students Association because there was nobody to populate it. While I was an administrator, the school was still struggling very hard to improve diversity, but had made really giant leaps from where we were in the late ‘80s to early ‘90s. For women, I think we went from the high 20s up until the mid-40s while I was affiliated with the school and that made an enormous difference in how students felt in the classroom.

JIM: There were very few student activities outside of the academic ones at the law school. That was certainly true in both my days as a student and as Dean of Students and as a result there was less cohesion among the students. I get a sense, and I especially get it from my granddaughter, Heather, who graduated in 2002, that there is much closer interrelationship among students today than there was then, which I think is all to the good.

MARSHA: Amy, you know what that looks like today.

AMY: Women today are about 45 percent of the JD student body. Faculty diversity is still an issue, but our 1L class [this year] is 10 percent African American. We have a very active BLSA [chapter], and we’re ending diversity month today with salsa lessons going on right now at Wine Mess in the Green Lounge, sponsored by the Latino Law Students Association. Groups like Law Women’s Caucus, OutLaw, APALSA, and others are really strong and really active. I helped restart Amicus, the group for partnered and married students, because we continue to have a large number of men and women students with children. Some students also have children while they’re in law school.

JIM: I wanted to add briefly that so far as diversity is concerned, when I was in law school and when I was Dean of Students, there was no such thing as a gay or lesbian law student. But of course that was not the fact, and by the time my granddaughter was attending law school, there was a vibrant LGBT law student association, OutLaw.

DICK: My hunch is that there were in percentage terms perhaps as many gay students back then, but we didn’t know who they were.

JIM: Exactly, yes. I should also say that when I graduated from law school I entered a professional field in which there were fewer than 70,000 people and I believe this year alone over 80,000 people graduated from law school. There has been an enormous change with respect to the profession, where people go, how many of them end up in corporations.

MARSHA: What were the biggest student issues when you were Dean of Students?

ELLEN: The really big transition that happened [between] ’95 and 2004 was technology. When I arrived, we communicated with students on paper, then we developed an e-mail system and contacted students on e-mail. Soon, we began using e-mail exclusively. We started to allow students to use laptops in the classroom; we started to move into laptop exams. Each one of those changes brought concerns about maintaining the integrity of the institution and trying to be aware of the opportunities that technology presented.
AMY: I really love this job. Last Thursday night I would have said the CLF auction was fantastic. But then Friday night I got an e-mail from a student after I e-mailed all the 1Ls about grades. The student had forwarded my e-mail to her mom and her mom had sent her an e-mail back about what a great environment she chose to come to for law school. So I thought, this is the best day I’ve had at this job. Then last night I was talking with students at a BLSA alumni event and they mentioned the wellness activities my office has organized and how excited they are about them. They also talked about the spirit of community at the Law School and how happy they are here. I thought that was the best moment. It seems like every day has a favorite moment. Certainly there are moments that are not so great every day, but every day has been great.

ELLEN: I was going to echo that because I have a really hard time saying one favorite moment. I loved getting up and going to work every day. It is a fantastic environment where people were stimulating. It was kind of the best kind of intellectual environment and fun community you could hope for. What sticks out are the little moments where a student takes you aside or a parent takes you aside at graduation and talks about something I did and how important that was to that particular student. It’s humbling. You understand how important some little things in life can be. It gave me a real appreciation for the impact that that job could have on people.

DICK: I agree with Ellen. The conversations that you have with students and then after they’ve graduated about things that happened that they felt somehow you were responsible and helped them in some fashion, those are already very rewarding. I like it that I have the [international] students over for Thanksgiving and I can give my little talk about the history of Thanksgiving and what the food is meant to be. Each day I look forward to dealing with new students and new issues. I don’t really dread coming into work. I may dread some of the things I have to do, some of the routine, but I look forward to each day.

MARSHA: Any advice for our newest Dean of Students who has all of six months under her belt at this point?

DICK: There is this issue of balancing the function as a student advocate on behalf of the students and [as an] administrator. It’s important that the dean and the faculty not see you as the messenger. It’s important for them to hear from students directly why the students are unhappy. You want to try to be as helpful as you can to the students, but you don’t want the dean or the faculty to see you as a pest. They need to have access to the students and it [gives] the students another reason to be critical if we don’t listen to them and talk to them about issues.

JIM: I second every word. Some of the faculty have discovered or perhaps already knew that those relationships between them and students are very important and require nurturing and attention and some just don’t feel it and need to be pushed in that direction. As Dick said earlier, you can easily feel like a second-class citizen surrounded by all of the great minds of the legal education world and that’s not appropriate.

AMY: I kept saying one of my favorite things about this job is getting to be surrounded by smart people, but there are days where it does seem like it was a little easier at a law firm.

ELLEN: The one bit of advice I would throw out is the importance of having touchstones. It’s a crazy job. You’re living within several different cultures simultaneously and everybody has been trained to advocate, so everyone’s trying to convince you that their issue is the important issue of the day. You need to stand back and say, these are some students that I trust are levelheaded, or these are a few faculty members that have a good sense of the institution, or these are some colleagues at other schools who seem to understand what they’re doing. It’s important to have those people [who] you can talk these things through with so that you can keep perspective. I struggled a lot in the beginning to get the perspective of 650 people and not be swayed by the 20 hysterical people in front of you.

AMY: I’m fascinated by what you all have to say about this. We might have to do a Part II at some point.

ELLEN: Yeah, we could check back and see what Amy’s doing a year from now!