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Reflections on Dean Nina Appel

*Vincent Rougeau**

It is a pleasure and an honor to have this opportunity to reflect on the extraordinary career of Nina Appel. Nina's influence on legal education and, particularly, on Loyola University Chicago School of Law, has been profound, and I am sure there will be much discussion of that throughout these pages. Her influence on me was also significant, so I appreciate the chance to express my heartfelt thanks for her mentorship. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that I would not be the dean of Boston College Law School had I not met Nina Appel.

Nina hired me for my very first job in law teaching. I was 28 years old and, like many new law teachers, I had spent a couple of years at a big law firm, in my case, the Washington, D.C., office of Morrison & Foerster. My most extensive exposure to teaching had been as a teaching assistant for entry-level French classes in college. Strange as it seems today, this lack of experience was not unusual for new law faculty in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, to say that I was a little bit anxious about getting started would be an understatement.

Nina ultimately put my fears to rest. She was an inspiring and highly motivating leader for a young faculty member. Her energy was legendary, and as you watched her move around the building engaging her colleagues with new initiatives and plans for the school's future, you were drawn into the excitement. She had a wonderful way of encouraging you to do more, to be more creative, to take risks, and to strive for excellence. She embodied the Jesuit philosophy of "ever to excel" in so many ways, and she took seriously the Jesuit mission of educating the whole person, not only when she dealt with students, but also in her mentoring and development of junior faculty.

Nina told me early in my career that one day I would be a dean, and she gave me a number of opportunities that helped lay the groundwork, although I certainly did not see them that way at the time. One in particular that I think about often was serving on the university's committee on student assessment and learning outcomes. In retrospect, I am sure it was an assignment that most of my colleagues were trying to

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avoid. Although student assessment has been an important part of secondary and undergraduate education for a long time, it is only now, over twenty years later, that law schools have begun to engage seriously with the academic research on student learning. My experience on the committee taught me a lot about the need to understand whether students actually learn what we are trying to teach them, and it had an impact on my teaching thereafter. Now, as a dean, I have had to implement a process of creating learning outcomes and developing a system of student assessment at Boston College Law School, and much of that work has been in cooperation with the departments across the university.

One of Nina's many gifts is her ability to judge potential in people and to unselfishly lead them to develop it. Of course, this sometimes meant that the person she developed would move on to do other things. In my case, I joined the faculty at Notre Dame Law School after seven very happy years at Loyola. It was not an easy decision for me to leave; in fact, it was probably one of the most difficult decisions in my academic career. In the end, however, going to Notre Dame was an important part of my personal and professional growth. Nina was sad to see me go, but she guided me through the decision with the mentorship she had always exhibited during my time on the Loyola faculty. When members of my faculty now come to me with offers from other schools, I think back to my interaction with Nina and I try to see the discussion as a moment for personal and professional engagement with a colleague. I have the needs and interests of the law school front and center, too, of course, but in the end the dean's primary role in these situations is to understand what a faculty member is looking for when considering a move. Ultimately, I must determine whether I am in a position to give that to them if they stay.

This leads me to my final point, which is how Nina has influenced me as a dean. The length of Nina's tenure as dean at Loyola places her among a small, venerable group of deans in the history of modern American legal education. One reason I think Nina was so successful for such a long time is that she understood early on that being a dean was a leadership role that required particular skills, many of which are separate and distinct from those required of a professor. In years past, it was not uncommon to hear that the ideal dean was simply a "first among equals"—a member of the faculty with a few additional administrative and external responsibilities, such as fundraising. Nina realized earlier than most that to be successful, a dean also had to be committed to a leadership strategy and a vision for the future of the institution. Critical to the success of that vision was the faculty. At the end of the day, a dean would succeed based on her ability to inspire and engage the men and women that formed the school's most valuable resource.

Trained as we are to master all the details and anticipate all the questions, successful lawyers often misunderstand leadership and therefore fail as deans. The dean cannot, and should not, do everything. Her most important role is to recognize and empower the gifts and talents of those around her. Understanding the individuals within the faculty and giving them the ability to excel at those things that will be good for them and good for the school is at the heart of a successful deanship. Nina was wonderful at creating the conditions for this kind of excellence. She surrounded herself with people of character and commitment who served with her in the law school administration, and she sought out and offered opportunities to faculty to do interesting and exciting things that brought distinction to the school.

Thank you, Nina, for all that you have done to inspire me and those around you. Thank you for your extraordinary service to Loyola University Chicago School of Law, to the legal academy, and to the legal profession. You can move into retirement knowing that your legacy lives on in the lives of many people and institutions that will continue to “set the world aflame” for many years to come.