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## In Appreciation: Don Weidner

Charles W. Ehrhardt

*Florida State University College of Law*

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## IN APPRECIATION: DON WEIDNER

CHARLES W. EHRHARDT\*

Twenty-five years after he was first appointed, Donald J. Weidner stepped down on June 30, 2016 as Dean of the Florida State University College of Law. During his deanship, the FSU law school was remarkably transformed.<sup>1</sup>

In the fall of 1975, I attended the Association of American Law Schools' hiring meeting in Washington, D.C. as chair of the Faculty Appointments Committee. One evening after the day's interviews with possible faculty candidates were completed, Dean Josh Morse and I were relaxing in our interview suite. Professor Joe Jacobs, who was then a member of our faculty, brought his friend and former colleague by the suite to say hello. His friend was Don Weidner, who at the time was on the law faculty at Cleveland State. We hit it off that evening, and the following fall Don came to Florida State and fortunately never left.

Don was appointed dean in 1991, at a time of increasing expectations for the school. Under Don's leadership, the college expanded the quality and size of the faculty as well as increasing the quality and productivity of its research and scholarship. Today the school has a national scholarly profile.<sup>2</sup> Areas such as environmental, tax, international, and business law significantly expanded not only in the size and quality of the faculty but also in the curriculum opportunities available to students.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the quality of the student body underwent a significant increase as measured by LSAT scores and undergraduate grade point averages. In addition, the school's growing reputation attracted graduates from a wide variety of quality universities and colleges.

In his first year as dean, Don was instrumental in establishing and obtaining the funding for our Summer for Undergraduates Program which bears his name. The primary purpose of the program is to increase

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\* Ladd Professor Emeritus. In 1967, Professor Ehrhardt joined the College of Law faculty at the beginning of the school's second year when the size of the faculty expanded from three to six.

1. In 2011, Don Weidner was recognized as one of the country's nine law school deans who had transformed their schools in the last decade. Brian Leiter, *Nine Transformative Deans in the Last Decade*, LAW PROFESSOR BLOGS NETWORK: BRIAN LEITER'S L. SCH. REP. (July 19, 2011), <http://leiterlawschool.typepad.com/leiter/2011/07/ten-transformative-deans-in-the-last-decade.html>.

2. Readers of the influential Brian Leiter's Law School Reports blog voted our faculty the nation's 35th best in a 2014 survey on the nation's top law faculties. Brian Leiter, *Top 50 law faculties, 2014 edition*, LAW PROFESSOR BLOGS NETWORK: BRIAN LEITER'S L. SCH. REP. (Nov. 11, 2014), <http://leiterlawschool.typepad.com/leiter/2014/11/top-50-law-faculties-2014-edition.html>. According to a 2015 study of law faculty scholarly impact, our faculty is #1 in Florida and #39 nationally. *Id.*

3. U.S. News & World Report (2016) Florida State's environmental law program is ranked 18th best and our tax law program is 23rd best nationally. *Florida State University: All Rankings*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/florida-state-university-134097/overall-rankings> (last visited July 1, 2016).

the pipeline of diverse candidates for law school and is an ABA-recognized model for law schools with similar programs around the country.

After six years of leadership, Don decided to step down as dean and returned to the teaching faculty. His sabbatical was short lived when the tenure of his successor was brief, and the need for interim leadership was filled by Don. The university did not appoint a search committee. In 2000, a delegation of faculty requested a meeting with the University's Provost, went to his office and advised him not to appoint a search committee, but rather to strike the Interim from Don's title, which the Provost was pleased to do.

The success of our law students was foremost in Don's view. Moot Court, Mock Trial, and other student organizations frequently received national recognition.<sup>4</sup> The job placement rate of the college's graduates continually ranks the best in the state of Florida.<sup>5</sup> For the past two years, the significant efforts in expanding the diversity of our student body is reflected in the entering classes being more than thirty percent African-American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian.<sup>6</sup>

Don was a prolific fundraiser who dramatically increased our contributions from alumni and other donors. The law school's endowment has increased by six hundred percent since he became dean, with the resulting additional funds for student scholarships, student organizations, and faculty support. Each year the number of students who contributed to the school's annual fund drive was among the best in the county. For example, in the spring of 2016, eighty-one percent of our students were contributors. Even though he raised significant private moneys for the school, he was able to expand the school's physical footprint by fifty percent without the expenditure of any of these private funds as a result of his active involvement with the Florida legislature.<sup>7</sup>

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4. Since 2010, the Moot Court Team has won 1st place in eleven national competitions and in one international competition. During the fall 2015 semester, the Mock Trial Team won 1st place in two national competitions. In 2015, our Black Law Students Association won 1st place in the National Frederick Douglass Moot Court Competition. In 2014, our BLSA won 1st place in the National Thurgood Marshall Mock Trial Competition. In 2016, our BLSA was again named National Chapter of the Year. In 2008, 2009, 2012, 2013, and 2014, the Student Bar Association received the national Student Bar Association Award, a top honor, from the Law Student Division of the American Bar Association.

5. According to ABA data, Florida State is the #1 law school in Florida in terms of the percentage of 2015 graduates employed ten months after graduation in full-time, long-term, bar passage-required, or J.D. advantage jobs. *2015 Section of Legal Education—Employment Summary Report*, A.B.A., <http://employmentsummary.abaquestionnaire.org/> (last visited July 1, 2016).

6. Hispanic Business (2014) ranks Florida State the nation's #2 law school for Hispanic students. *Best Schools for Hispanics*, NAT'L JURIST (Sept. 15, 2011), <http://www.nationaljurist.com/content/best-schools-hispanics-florida-schools-dominate>.

7. The addition of the Law Advocacy Center added 50,000 square feet to our facilities and was a result of a series of actions by the Florida Legislature culminating in 2010 with a \$12.9 million appropriation. H.B. 5001 (Fla. 2010); *FSU Law Begins Expanding into the Old First DCA*, THE FLORIDA BAR NEWS (Jan. 15, 2011), <http://www.floridabar.org/divcom/>

Don's steady hand guided us through times of deep divisions on the faculty, as well as more recently, in a time of economic uncertainty and a changing national demand for legal education. Partially as a result, we now offer an LL.M. in Environmental Law as well as one in American Law for Foreign Lawyers. Additionally, we have a Juris Masters program for professionals who seek to enhance their careers in other areas by acquiring a more sophisticated understanding of the law.

In addition to serving as dean, Don continued teaching and producing numerous scholarly publications. At the university level, he served in a variety of roles including chair of the University's branding committee in recent years. He has continued to be very active in law reform on a national level. First being elected to membership in the American Law Institute, then serving as the Reporter on the Revised Uniform Partnership Act for the Uniform Law Commissioners, and currently serving as a Commissioner from Florida to the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws.

One of the significant reasons Don turned down a number of opportunities to leave Florida State was that although he was born, raised, and went to college in New York City and practiced with a large Wall Street law firm, after he arrived in Tallahassee he discovered the charm and ambience of the area. He particularly appreciated our close access to the Gulf of Mexico. Don and his wife Jiji, spent significant time on their forty-two foot Hatteras Long Range Cruiser sailing boat. More recently they enjoy taking their twenty-two foot Mako fishing boat from their weekend retreat at Alligator Point on day trips to Dog Island. To celebrate his seventieth birthday, Don chartered a large Catamaran to spend a week with his family sailing in the Caribbean Islands.

Dean Mason Ladd came to Florida State to start the law school after a distinguished career in legal education. Ladd used to tell those early classes and our then-young faculty what a wonderful opportunity they had to be at FSU because one day we would be the best law school in the State of Florida, and one of the best in the country. At least our young faculty in those days, smiled and thought to ourselves that it was just wishful thinking. Today Ladd is happy and looking approvingly at Don because he made that early dream come true.<sup>8</sup>

Don Weidner's longevity as dean is extraordinary and attests to his strong and effective leadership in a position where the tenure is

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jn/jnnews01.nsf/8c9f13012b96736985256aa900624829/b9a4582ca16ed14a852578100068839f?OpenDocument.

8. Business Insider (2014) ranks Florida State as Florida's #1 law school, and 32nd best nationally. U.S. News & World Report (2016) rates Florida State as the 50th best law school in the nation. Melissa Stranger & Andy Kiersz, *Here's How We Ranked the Best Law Schools in America*, BUS. INSIDER (Nov. 24, 2014, 11:29 AM), <http://www.businessinsider.com/best-law-schools-in-america-methodology-2014-11>.

generally a few years. Don, your leadership transformed the law school. Thank you for a job well done.