

# Florida State University Law Review

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Volume 43  
Issue 4 *Winter 2016*

Article 3

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Winter 2016

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### Recommended Citation

Margaret ". Rolando, *Don Weidner: Man of Action*, 43 Fla. St. U. L. Rev. 1121 (2017) .  
<https://ir.law.fsu.edu/lr/vol43/iss4/3>

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## DON WEIDNER: MAN OF ACTION

MARGARET "PEGGY" A. ROLANDO\*

There are many apt descriptions of Don Weidner: Dean Emeritus of the College of Law, professor, scholar, leader, innovator, strategic thinker, friend, mentor, coffee fanatic, natty dresser. Many leaders claim to be transformational but few really are. Don Weidner is.

Don Weidner pushed the Florida State University College of Law out of its cozy niche. Once content to play second fiddle to the University of Florida, the College of Law is now a nationally ranked, highly competitive law school, competing toe to toe with UF and regularly besting rival regional law school power houses.

In an era when the average tenure of a law school dean is less than five years, Weidner's almost twenty-five years at the helm of the College of Law has given it unprecedented stability, advancement, and connections. Weidner understood that the law school could not excel unless all of its stakeholders—students, faculty, administrators, alumni, and local community—thived. Weidner demanded excellence from administration, faculty, students, and himself. His high expectations have yielded extraordinary results.

With the assistance of the faculty and administrators, Weidner fostered a welcoming, supportive environment for students. His student-centric approach led to the expansion of course offerings and student organizations. He also hired outstanding administrators like Nancy "Dean B" Benavides, Associate Dean for Student Affairs, who repeatedly removes obstacles to student success. Weidner's long term emphasis on job placement and close connections with alumni has led to our graduates having one of the highest job placement rates of law schools in Florida. He brought Rosanna Catalano, Associate Dean for Placement, on board to advise and support students and graduates with their job searches, providing assistance with resumes, interviews, and protocol. Their combined efforts have led multiple national media to rank Florida State's job placement among the nation's best for law students.

Law student organizations excelled with Weidner's encouragement and support. He regularly emailed the alumni announcing the latest triumphs of the Moot Court and Mock Trial practice teams as well as the awards bestowed on organizations such as the Black Law Students Association and Student Bar Association.

Weidner is a strategic thinker whose innovations have built on one another, enhanced the reputation of the College of Law, and developed a close knit, cohesive community of FSU law students, faculty, and alumni.

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\* Florida State University College of Law, J.D. Class of 1978. The author has observed Don Weidner as a student, friend, member of the law school's Board of Visitors, donor, and former member of Board of Trustees of Florida State University.

These innovations include the Board of Visitors, *Alumni Magazine*, and the Advocacy Center.

The Board of Visitors (BOV), formed in 1994, was the brain child of Weidner and the late Professor Steve Goldstein. Its purpose is to support the College of Law, raise its profile in the legal community, and encourage greater financial and intellectual commitment to the law school by its graduates and other leaders in the bar. The Board consists of approximately forty members (mostly alumni from a cross section of the legal and business sectors) who meet at least annually to interact with students and faculty. The annual BOV meetings have evolved into a wide ranging exchange of ideas among the dean, faculty, and board members for improving the law school.

For example, several years ago BOV members suggested that the law school implement certificate programs so students could demonstrate deeper knowledge in a specialized area. A year later—voila—Weidner announced certificate programs in business, tax law, and environmental law. The Board of Visitors also encouraged Weidner and the environmental faculty to develop an LL.M in Environmental Law to capitalize on the school's nationally ranked environmental law program. FSU Law now offers two LL.M programs: one in American Law for Foreign Lawyers and another in Environmental Law and Policy.

About twelve years ago, Weidner instituted the first *Alumni Magazine*. Published twice a year, it's slick, attractive, and highly readable. Notwithstanding its title, the *Alumni Magazine* celebrates the achievements of the entire College of Law family. Each issue features not only articles about the alumni, homecoming, class news, and the Dean's Column, but also pieces about the faculty and their achievements, publications, and activities. It also highlights student activities, awards, and triumphs. We read about developments at the law school, such as the national rankings, bar passage rates, job placement rates, and additional funding from the Legislature. The magazine reminds us of the success of our law school, classmates, fellow alumni, professors, current students, and Weidner's role in enhancing the value of our law degrees.

The Advocacy Center is yet another example of Weidner's strategic thinking. The former home of the First District Court of Appeals was renovated and repurposed to house five courtrooms—four with jury boxes—of different sizes and configurations. It gives students the opportunity to hone their trial and appellate advocacy skills in a lifelike setting. As a highly desirable venue for national and regional mock trial and moot court competitions, it showcases the school. The Advocacy Center also includes faculty offices and our renowned Public Interest Law Center, directed by Professor Paolo Annino.

Weidner is masterful at connecting students with alumni through Board of Visitors meetings, guest lectures, adjunct-taught courses, and

formal and informal mentoring programs. Each annual Board of Visitor meeting customarily includes alumni interviews or small group sessions with students. He also encourages students to reach out informally through calls and emails to meet alumni.

Weidner created a highly welcoming environment for our graduates. He frequently invited those with special expertise to serve as adjunct professors or guest lecturers. He called on our many illustrious alumni to share their skills, insights, and experience with law students. Florida Supreme Court Justice Ricky Polson has taught Florida Constitutional Law, Insurance Law, and Alternative Dispute Resolution. Prominent Tallahassee attorney Pete Dunbar, who practices and lobbies in the area of condominium law, offers a course on Condominium and Community Housing Law each spring. Fred Karlinsky's course on Law and Risk Management, taught during spring break, is in such high demand that students skip a vacation to take it.

Weidner's emphasis on the student does not stop with present or past students. He helped design and implement programs to improve undergraduate access to law. One of these is the 3+3 program that allows qualified students from Florida State University and University of Central Florida to attend our law school after only three years of college, provided they satisfy all but the last thirty academic credit hours required for their undergraduate degree. Under the 3+3 program, the first year of law school counts toward both the undergraduate degree and the law degree. This results in significant savings to the students and their families.

Weidner also developed the Summer for Undergraduates Program, which was recently renamed in his honor. Since 1992, this program brings select undergraduates to campus for a month-long introduction to law. It was designed to expose students to law school and to assist them in acquiring skills in writing and critical thinking. It is intended to attract students from traditionally underserved communities and increase diversity. Students have the opportunity to learn about the law school application process. Each summer, approximately sixty students attend classes and workshops taught by the Law School faculty five days a week for four weeks. FSU Law provides free room and board, course materials, and a stipend thanks to a very generous endowment from alumni Wayne Hogan and his wife Patricia.

Weidner is a highly effective teacher with a knack for inculcating not only the substantive law, but its business aspects. I first encountered Weidner as a student in his Business Associations class in 1976. His lectures in the subject area were often sprinkled with examples drawn from the business press. He urged us to subscribe to the *Wall Street Journal* for its comprehensive reporting on national and international business. I promptly signed up for the *WSJ* at the student rate of 10 cents per copy, which arrived by mail two to three days later. Weidner's influence pre-

vails to this day, as I am a dedicated reader of the *WSJ* and other sources of business news.

Later, I enrolled in Weidner's Real Estate Finance course, not knowing that it would be instrumental in my ultimate career choice as a real estate lawyer. One of his favorite mantras—or at least the one I remember—was “all real estate is finance.” It exemplified his emphasis on both the legal and business aspects of the subject matter. As a real estate practitioner, I am regularly called upon to be certain that the project I am structuring is financeable. Weidner was an academic with an avid interest in the realities of the practice. He was always curious about the latest trends in real estate development and finance and wanted his students to know about them. Consequently, it was an honor to be invited to talk with students in his Real Estate Finance course through the years on construction financing, hotel loans, and commercial mortgage backed securities.

As Dean, Weidner was an ardent supporter of the faculty, encouraging not only excellent teaching but significant research, publication, and scholarship. Weidner celebrated the faculty's innovations, awards, and publications. He also gave faculty members opportunities for professional development at critical junctions in their careers by arranging for sabbaticals or lighter teaching loads for research and book projects. Portraits of retired faculty members grace the halls in recognition of those who contributed so significantly to the school's success.

Weidner frequently mentioned Professor Tahirih Lee's course, International Trade Simulation, which partners with the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade. This was the first law school course to link American students and their Chinese counterparts in simulated trade transactions. He often cited Professor Hannah Wiseman's expertise in fracking and her testimony before the Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee. During the *Bush v. Gore* litigation in 2000, Weidner was ebullient when Professor Rob Atkinson appeared on French television—commenting in French—on the developments in the case. Atkinson's appearances on *National Public Radio* about the contested 2000 election also drew praise.

Weidner led by example. He is a nationally recognized scholar in partnership law. He served as the Reporter for the *Revised Uniform Partnership Act*, which was adopted by the *National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws* in 1994. He is co-author of the leading treatise on the subject, *The Revised Uniform Partnership Act*. His books and articles in this area are widely cited and appreciated for their scope and depth. He is also a member of the *American Law Institute* and the *Uniform Law Commission*.

Don Weidner is a prodigious fund raiser and master of the soft sell. He has an abiding interest in alumni and their professional lives. He is a

great listener. From a donor's perspective, it is easy to contribute to FSU Law for many reasons. Weidner clearly communicated why the law school needed more resources, more facilities, more scholarships, and more endowed professorships. And the results are obvious to the donor. Weidner and the faculty also repeatedly say "thank you" in multiple ways: notes, emails, calls, invitations, portraits of donors, and stories and recognition in the *Alumni Magazine*. The culture of giving starts early with over eighty percent of all students contributing while they are still in law school—solid evidence of a satisfied consumer. With over thirty percent of the alumni giving, FSU Law's donor rate consistently ranks in the top ten of all law schools in the country and the third highest rate for public law schools.

Don Weidner left a lasting legacy. He has fostered a culture of "giving back" among students and alumni that has and will continue to benefit the College of Law and enhance its excellence.

