LEGACY: PROFESSOR LAWRENCE P. WILKINS

WILLIAM J. WOODWARD, JR.*

In 1980, I arrived at Indiana University School of Law—Indianapolis to start work as a brand-new Assistant Professor. I was assigned to an office adjacent to that of another newcomer, one Professor Lawrence P. Wilkins, and our offices were linked by a doorway for the time I remained on the faculty. Even then, the person I encountered in the next room had some gray hair. And he seemed extremely gruff and a little scary at first. He remained after I left and has now retired. What did he leave behind?

It's a rarity these days to find *anyone* staying on any one job for more than a few years. What then do we make of someone who defies itinerant stereotypes and stays for close to 30 years? In a song written in his later years, musician Neil Young nostalgically wrote about having left "our tracks in the sound."[1] What "tracks" might a professional educator leave apart from their published work?

Deans, of course, leave in their wake classrooms, libraries, buildings, or portraits. But professors who resist the mysterious draw of administration leave few physical traces of their time on the job. Their legacy, rather, resides in the way their former institution now functions and, of course, in the minds and thinking of those whom they have influenced through their teaching and writing.

So, the dean appoints a newly-hired professor to some committee and in the course of that committee's work, the professor has a good idea. It could be a new admissions policy, an idea for creating a new student organization, or a curricular change. Of the hundreds of such ideas an engaged Professor X might have had in three decades of institutional service, some will have been implemented and some of those may show up in some recognizable form today while others may have more subtly contributed to the feel or very trajectory of the institution itself. So, for example, the professor may have arrived with a bee in his bonnet about putting more simulation work into the curriculum. Persistent noise in committee and faculty meetings and leadership by example may have slowly, almost imperceptibly, transformed the institution into one where simulation instruction has become the norm rather than the exception.

An active, engaged professor might affect an institution in far more subtle ways. Many know or have heard of institutions where conflicts within the faculty threaten to paralyze the institution and others that are models of harmonious, consensus decision making. While some institutions seem condemned to faculty dysfunction in perpetuity, they don't just get that way. Nor are harmonious institutions the beneficiaries of dumb luck. Strong, persistent personalities can, over time have a positive—or negative—influence on how colleagues relate to one another (and the dean), both inside and outside of formal meetings. Strong deans can, of course, influence these dynamics, but they are seldom in it for the long haul and the "personality" of a law faculty can only be altered over the long run.

---

* Professor of Law, Temple University. Thanks to Molly Woodward for her editorial suggestions.

1. NEIL YOUNG, *Painter*, *on* PRAIRIE WIND (Reprise Records 2005).

The professor exerts this kind of influence almost unconsciously, not specifically *intending* to change things, just doing the job. The influence comes from the gravitational force the personality has on people around them. The influence is felt indirectly inasmuch as it is slow and evolutionary, only perceived when taking the long view backwards.

Students, by contrast, are the targets of direct, even calculated influence. However, opportunities to influence students are far more fleeting and diluted. Here a professor of thirty or so years has the numbers in his favor. Simple odds suggest that we would find some tracks in the lives of the thousands of students a professor has encountered over a career of many years, particularly if that professor regularly encountered entering, first-year law students. Tangible tracks might be surprisingly trivial—showing up in a former student's routine use of an unconventional term ("she's got a *Palsgraf* problem"), a particular diagram to help in mapping a given kind of problem (a time line), or some abbreviation ("K" for contract). Educators might hope the tracks would be more meaningful (a highly-developed sense of "proximate cause") but substantive tracks are harder to claim and probably more subtle—more likely found in something like the similarity between a long-forgotten torts class and the way a lawyer of twenty years approaches a given torts problem. Such tracks may be buried but are foundational nonetheless.

When it comes to influence on colleagues, the dynamic is somewhere between inadvertent influence that occurs imperceptibly over the long haul and direct, pointed influence designed for and directed at students. It depends on such random factors as legal specialty, age, and even office location.

I was hired almost thirty years ago to teach contracts and commercial courses at Indiana University School of Law—Indianapolis and left four years later as an Associate Professor headed to the East Coast. My good fortune was for that brief period to have occupied that office adjacent to the gruff, graying Associate Professor Wilkins, a lateral hire from Akron Ohio, three or four years my senior. For a new professor, the first years are formative, those in which one learns to teach, learns appropriate behavior towards one's institution, colleagues, and students, and begins to develop a professional identity very different from that of a lawyer. I spent four years in that adjacent office with the door to his office open nearly all the time. One could scarcely wish for a better office assignment inasmuch as Professor Wilkins (whom I'll now refer to as Larrie) taught me much of what I know about being a law professor. He was, easily, the strongest influence in my own early development as an academic, and I see evidence of the tracks he's left with me nearly every day.

Most of what I learned from Larrie has to do generally with the level of professionalism we ought to expect from those fortunate enough to be trusted with an academic appointment. Larrie taught me about academic professionalism largely through his example as a teacher and institutional good citizen. Some came directly as instruction, usually solicited. Far more came indirectly, from the gravitational force of his personality and the values embedded in it.

Teaching was at the center of Larrie's professional work. While he used to caution me that teaching was a "black hole" into which one could pour endless energy to the detriment of a professor's other obligations, he put as much creative

energy into the teaching enterprise as any experienced teacher I have ever known. He was one of the first people I know of to use the labor-intensive device of dividing large classes into "law firms" and using that construct to teach his students substance, skills, and professionalism in the process. He was constantly developing new exercises for his classes, constantly trying new ideas, constantly changing. He introduced me to the concept of the "exam feedback memo," a device that takes the final exam—typically an evaluative device—and turns it into a learning device. My own exams have ever since been followed by exam feedback memos and, I'm sure he'd be happy to learn, at least a handful of my own colleagues have followed the example I acquired from him. Larrie also developed materials to teach students about taking exams, materials I continue to use to this day. He had great curiosity about the process of learning and, leading by example, prompted me to attend sessions outside the law school dealing with broader issues of teaching.

Larrie also served as a role model for me on the general question of how a law professor relates to the institution—how much energy one can appropriately devote to institutional service, what range of creativity is acceptable, how one relates to one's colleagues on committees, how much one should care about institutional decisions. I recall him always being in the thick of institutional issues—wholesale curricular reform was the first of them. Yet while his engagement was unequivocal while the issue of the day was in play, it was also measured—he knew when to give up on a lost cause. I made very few moves in my own institutional work at Indiana without consulting him and he was always a source of wisdom and good guidance.

Perhaps the most important instruction Larrie gave me by example was about professionalism and integrity more generally. He was always scrupulously honest and straight, sometimes to a fault perhaps. He said what he thought to Dean and colleagues alike, even when his views were unpopular or difficult to accommodate. He would never consider reducing his classroom demands on students to gain popularity and was regarded by students as a very demanding teacher. He was unbelievably careful about grading exams and papers. He was always a workhorse on committees and a very effective leader when he was chair. In short, he simply never slacked off, always gave everything he had to the job before him.

While I know they're there, it is anybody's guess what less-tangible tracks Larrie left with me—buried and mixed as they are with over twenty-five years of work 700 miles away from that adjacent office. Nor can I guess at what tracks Larrie left with other, longer-term colleagues, with his institution of nearly thirty years, or with his thousands of students. I do know that we're all the better for his influence, whatever it was.

I can't contribute a library, a portrait, or even a book to honor his legacy. But while he may not have invented them (I don't know who did), Larrie was the ancestral source of *my* exam feedback memos, nearly thirty years worth of them distributed to thousands of *my* students. It thus seems appropriate, in the case of such a consummate educator, to acknowledge his contribution to *my* students. So, I've dedicated my latest one that I've distributed to my students, for an exam just concluded in Contracts, as *The Lawrence P. Wilkins Memorial Exam*

Feedback Memo. This may be an eccentric or even a corny move, but in our age of the impermanent present, there seems something useful in reminding ourselves (and my own students) that ideas have a history, and a longevity that survives particular individuals.

Larrie's many contributions are a legacy about which many have been, and will continue to be grateful.