

THE IMPACT OF A TEACHER AND A TEACHER'S DEAN: I. RICHARD GERSHON

*Frederick G. Slabach**

Ira Richard Gershon's career in legal education spanned more than four decades and five law schools.¹ He influenced hundreds of faculty members and thousands of students. Although he spent much of that career in leadership positions as associate dean and dean,² his family confirmed what we perceived—he always thought of himself first and foremost as a teacher.³

He *was* a teacher, and he was a “teacher’s dean.”

I had the good fortune of knowing Richard for thirty years. We first met during the 1991-92 academic year when we both attended an ABA associate dean’s workshop. Richard had been the associate dean at Stetson University College of Law for three years,⁴ and I had just entered the position of associate dean at Mississippi College School of Law. As the seasoned academic dean, Richard was generous with his time and counsel. Over the next ten years, we saw each other frequently at various conferences

* Frederick G. Slabach has served the University of Mississippi School of Law as Dean since July 2023, following twelve years as President of Texas Wesleyan University and thirteen years in legal education. In addition, Slabach served in a variety of positions in government in Washington, D.C. He earned his bachelor’s degree in political science with Highest Honors at Mississippi College; his law degree from the University of Mississippi School of Law, where he was on the *Mississippi Law Journal*; and received the Phi Delta Phi Award, the faculty award to the outstanding graduate, and his LL.M from Columbia University. He clerked for U.S. District Court Judge William C. Keady (N.D. Miss.), and practiced law with Akin Gump in Washington, D.C.

¹ I. Richard Gershon, *Curriculum Vitae*, UNIV. OF MISS. SCH. OF L. (2018), <https://law.olemiss.edu/assets/Gershon-Resume-2018-Final-Edited.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/3CWK-ALWC>].

² *Id.*

³ *Ira Richard Gershon Obituary*, J. HENRY STUHR (Dec. 9, 2024), <https://obits.jhenrystuhr.com/ira-gershon> [<https://perma.cc/W9CX-BLQQ>].

⁴ Gershon, *supra* note 1.

and workshops and maintained a mutually supportive and trusted relationship.

In 1998, Richard was selected to become vice dean and professor of law at Texas Wesleyan University School of Law in Fort Worth. It was really a search for the law school's next dean. The law school had just come through the ABA approval process during the time that Frank Walwer served as dean. In 1997, Dean Walwer announced that he would be retiring at the end of the 1998-99 academic year. The law school decided to search for a vice dean with the expectation that this person would become dean upon Walwer's retirement. In 1999, following a successful year as vice dean, Richard was named interim dean and, in 2000, was named dean.⁵

I followed Richard as dean of Texas Wesleyan University School of Law in 2003. It wasn't easy to follow a dean who was beloved by the faculty. The thing that impressed me most about Richard was his ability to establish close and supportive relationships with individual members of the faculty. He was a "teacher's dean" in the sense that he worked to make sure all faculty members were put in the best position possible to be successful and to pursue their aspirations. Richard remained on the faculty at Texas Wesleyan for a year before he left to become the founding dean of the Charleston School of Law.⁶ During that year, I came to appreciate him as a colleague and servant leader who could be counted on for advice on all things—including advice to a new dean.

Twenty years later, I followed Richard again. This time as dean at the University of Mississippi School of Law. Richard served as dean of the University of Mississippi School of Law from 2010 to 2015 and then returned to full-time teaching.⁷ In the spring of 2023, as I was preparing to begin my new role, I contacted each member of the faculty and senior staff to have an individual conversation about their aspirations for the law school and their own professional development. I heard much of the recent history of the law school and the faculty. A common theme was that one of Richard's most important accomplishments as

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

dean was that he was able to help a fractured faculty become a collegial federation. During my on-boarding meeting with Richard, I let him know that his colleagues gave him credit for this important achievement. True to his genuine self-deprecating manner, Richard said that was nice of the faculty to say, but he gave them credit for the hard work.

Because I had followed him as dean at two different law schools, I thought I should ask him where he was headed next. “Nowhere!” he said. “I love it here.” I told him I was glad because I loved it too. He continued as a full-time member of the faculty until the summer of 2024—fifteen years of service to the law school and the Oxford community that he loved.

As Richard’s medical condition advanced, he made the decision to return to Charleston, South Carolina, where his family had extensive support. When we learned of his passing, we immediately contacted his family and asked if we could have a memorial service at the law school. I knew it would be important for our law school community to be able to recognize his service and the important relationships we all had with him. At the law school memorial,⁸ I was struck by the clear indication that the same servant leadership that had marked his decanal and faculty work was apparent in his service to the Oxford community and the many organizations with which he was engaged. Speaker after speaker communicated the impact he had on students, faculty, the law school, the university, and the community.

As we honor Richard’s memory, we recognize the influence this teacher continues to have on generations of faculty, students, and lawyers, as well as the communities they serve.

⁸ *Celebration of Life for Professor I. Richard Gershon*, UNIV. OF MISS. SCH. OF L. (Feb. 15, 2025), <https://law.olemiss.edu/event/celebration-of-life-for-professor-i-richard-gershon/> [https://perma.cc/BS5G-J57H].