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William R. Meagher - A Long Association with Fordham

Meagher R. William

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IN 1924, when I entered Fordham Law School in the Woolworth Building, it was a part-time school, with a part-time faculty and a part-time student body. Three “Divisions,” Morning, Afternoon, and Evening, met for two hours three days, and three hours two days a week. These classes, attended by students working their way at part-time or full-time jobs, were taught by men as there were no female faculty members. Because there were only three full-time professors, most of our teachers came to the classroom directly from a law office or courtroom.

The faculty, although small, was a distinguished one. It included John T. Loughran (later Chief Judge of the New York Court of Appeals), John A. Blake (later a New York State Bar Examiner), Francis X. Carmody (author of the famous work on New York Practice), John Finn, who subsequently succeeded the then Dean, Ignatius Wilkinson, and the memorable I. Maurice Wormser.

There were no electives; the three-year curriculum consisted of twenty-seven required courses. No Law Review or Urban Law Journal or Moot Court existed. The library was small, only fairly stocked, and sparsely attended.

Students were required to occupy assigned seats, and absences—unoccupied seats—were recorded. Three unexcused absences from a course caused failure in that course. The case system was ritually followed throughout the three-year program. The student stood and stated the facts and principles of the case; class discussion followed and ended with the professor’s statement of the law, generally and in New York. This, of course, took time—a case book was rarely completed—and a course ended with lectures on uncovered material.

Examinations followed a few days after classes closed—January Finals in one-semester courses and June Finals in full-year programs. Commencement on the Bronx campus in June preceded the Bar examinations by about three weeks. There was no Placement Office and graduates found positions on their own.

When I joined the Faculty in 1928 (remaining until 1945), additional evening sessions had just started on the Bronx campus, continuing there for several years. In 1943, the school moved from the Woolworth Building to 302 Broadway, occupying the entire three-floor office building.

The Great Depression hit in 1929, but did not reduce Law School attendance materially for college graduates could not find employment and some took up study of the Law as post-graduate work.

* Of Counsel, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, Class of ’27, Fordham Law School.
During the war years, however, classes were decimated by military enlistments and the draft. To enable students to earn their degrees sooner, courses were accelerated and summer recesses eliminated. Evening classes were taught in a “black-out.” Many studied in uniform and some were called up before completing the full course.

Nevertheless, the Law School prospered. In the period 1928-1945, it advanced substantially in scholastic standing and prestige, lifting its standards for both entrance and a degree, and obtaining accreditation.

In 1974, I rejoined the Faculty of eighty-two members (thirty-four full-time and forty-eight adjunct professors), lecturing to full-time students in the Day Division over a three-year program and to those in the Evening Division over a four-year period. The curriculum now includes eleven required courses in basic subjects such as Contracts, Torts, and Property, and some seventy elective courses ranging alphabetically from Accounting for Lawyers to Visual Arts. Included in the curriculum are a number of clinical programs, in which qualified students are enabled to handle actual cases under the supervision of experienced lawyers. The Fordham Law Review and the Fordham Urban Law Journal are being cited authoritatively by the courts and the Moot Court team has won many honors, including a victory in the National Moot Court Competition.

There are now a number of Endowed Chairs and a recently established Distinguished Professorship. Scholarships have been substantially increased. A Placement Office under the direction of a full-time professional director assists graduates seeking positions, whether permanent or temporary, provides career counseling, and advises candidates for judicial clerkships.

In short, one with my memories of over a half-century need only visit Lincoln Center and read the latest Law School Bulletin to realize that the Fordham Law School of today is not only a vastly improved, but entirely different, institution. Some may say I was born fifty-five years too soon. Each time I visit the Law School I am inclined to agree. But, on second thought, had I arrived later I would have missed being an eyewitness and a part of its splendid growth toward greatness.