

Roger Williams University

DOCS@RWU

Life of the Law School (1993-)

Archives & Law School History

2-20-2020

Law School News: A Place At The Table 2-20-2020

Michael M. Bowden

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.rwu.edu/law_archives_life



Part of the [Law and Gender Commons](#), [Legal Education Commons](#), and the [Legal Profession Commons](#)

February 20, 2020

Law School News

A Place at the Table

At RWU Law's Inaugural Women in Law Leadership Lecture, Columbia Law dean Gillian Lester urges young women lawyers and law students to be confident "you have a place at the table."



Gillian Lester, dean of Columbia Law School, delivers the Inaugural Women in Law Leadership Lecture at RWU Law. Image Credit: RWU Law/Andrea Hansen

February 20, 2020
Michael M. Bowden

[Gillian Lester](#), dean of Columbia Law School, advised and inspired on Tuesday evening as guest speaker for the Inaugural Women in Law Leadership Lecture at Roger Williams University School of Law, urging women lawyers and law students to claim "a place at the table."

Conversing in a relaxed "fireside chat" format before a sizeable audience in the Honorable Bruce M. Selya Appellate Courtroom, RWU Law Professor [Emily Sack](#) interviewed Lester on an array of topics impacting women in the practice of law – and those training to enter the profession.

Lester opened with the story of how she decided to become a candidate for the deanship at Berkeley Law in 2014, while serving as interim dean. As the mother of elementary and middle-school-aged children, Lester said, she initially didn't think it was a smart career move.

"It just didn't seem like the right time," she explained. "I didn't see myself as a dean. It wasn't part of my picture of myself."

Then two of her close friends on the faculty, both men, applied for the job.

"These two peers of mine hesitated not at all!" Lester said. "I paused and thought, 'Wait, we're all in the same moment in life. Our circumstances are absolutely parallel. We're in the same stages of our careers. And *I'm* the interim dean!' I started thinking about the gender dynamics at work there, and that was part of what spurred me to throw my hat in."

Still, it wasn't an easy decision.

"I felt a lot of trepidation," Lester said. "In my own mind, I didn't fit the profile of a dean. I had a lot of fears about both my skills and abilities as well as the stakes of taking on a role like that. I worried about my family life, and whether this would tear us apart – because I'd be working as a busy dean while I had kids at home."

In the end, however, she decided to take the chance.

"Put your shoulders back, take a deep breath, stand tall and walk into the room as though you belong there. Don't sit at the back. Sit at the table."

~ Gillian Lester, Dean, Columbia Law School

"At some point, I made a decision that might've felt rash at the moment – to just leap," Lester recalled. "And I leapt with butterflies in my stomach. But that's a lifelong lesson I've learned: that many of the things most worth doing are the things that are just a little bit of a reach. But if you make that reach and you manage to scramble up that hill, the sense of satisfaction and growth that you feel is tremendously rewarding."

When Sack asked her about the women colleagues who had encouraged her to apply for the deanship, and the role of mentors in general, Lester recalled her first law job – as an intern with a large labor and employment practice in her hometown of Vancouver, the summer after her first year of law school.

"There was a woman there, one of a small number of women who were partners at the firm then – she's now a judge on the British Columbia Court of Appeals," Lester said. "And I was working away in my little cubicle when she came up and slid a piece of paper across my desk that had about five names on it – all very influential members of the firm."

"I'm going to make a suggestion," the woman told her. "While you're here this summer, make an effort to knock on their doors and ask them if you could buy them a sandwich or a coffee."

Don't say lunch, because you don't want them to feel like they have to buy you an expensive lunch. So – just a sandwich; something very modest. And this will give you an opportunity to talk with them and tell them a little bit about yourself, and also to learn a little bit about their careers.”

Lester smiled at the memory, adding, “She gave me another piece of advice as well, one that has stayed with me to this day. She said, ‘When you walk into a room, slow down. If there’s an important meeting, slow down before you go into that room. Put your shoulders back, take a deep breath, stand tall and walk into the room as though you belong there. Don’t sit at the back. Sit at the table.’”

Such is the power of good advice from someone who’s a little older and wiser, Lester said.

“It’s really remarkable that, 33 years later, I still remember it like it was yesterday,” she noted. “I was 23 years old, and that was the power of having a woman I looked up to give me some simple advice. But it was so formative for me – and I still do it! Before I walk into a room – before I walked into *this* room! – I slow down, shoulders back, and I take a deep breath. So I really think mentors are critically important, particularly for women, who sometimes need that tap on the shoulder and that piece of encouragement.”

From her powerful position today, Lester said, she still tries to encourage young women lawyers and law students in the same way. “You receive it and you pay it forward,” she said. “And it’s a blessing to generations of women. We’re going through this path at different times, each with our own challenges. I feel an incredible sense of responsibility to be a mentor who doesn’t measure the challenges of the next generation by the yardstick that I had when I was going through the process.”

Family Issues

Returning to the question of work-family balance, Sack asked about Lester’s approach during her deanship.

“I was pretty clear from the beginning that I had children,” Lester said. “And I committed – though I know that not everybody can do this – to trying *not* to go out for evening events more than two nights a week, wanting to be home at the dinner table for the rest of the week.”

She also lists parental and other familial obligations on her calendar.

“Once you become a dean, everybody sees your calendar,” she said. “So when I had a parent-teacher meeting or some kind of school-related thing, I asked that we call it what it is – rather than just saying I had a ‘meeting’ or an ‘appointment.’ Because I wanted to send a message that this was part of life. And if we’re going to be serious about balancing families with jobs that are very busy, then we need to be able to have frank conversations about what that involves. So I made a very intentional choice to do that.”

“Did you get any kind of backlash?” Sack asked her.

“I got a lot of thanks,” Lester replied. “It didn’t come immediately. But over this next several years, people would quietly say to me, ‘I noticed. I noticed.’”

She employed other coping strategies as well.

“When I decided I wanted to be a dean permanently, I made a couple of different choices,” Lester said, concerning “things that we all read that we’re supposed to do, like sleeping more than four hours a night! And I really do sleep seven hours a night. I mean, every once in a while I have a five-and-a-half-hour night. But, I do sleep – and I exercise. I just make myself do it, I just force it.”

Lessons in Leadership

Lester is particularly interested in leadership education, particularly for women and underrepresented groups. Sack asked about her activities in that area.

“So many lawyers go into positions of leadership,” Lester replied. “Yet for a long time, law schools didn’t specifically teach leadership. So now we have [at Columbia Law] a marquee course as well as a number of experiential laboratory courses in which we teach leadership skills – a whole variety of characteristics that leaders tend to have. So many of them are teachable skills!”

Asked about her focus on women and minorities, Lester said it’s part of a wider effort to level the playing field.

“There are kinds of leadership and confidence that men are more likely to have than women – and I think the same is true across groups majority groups versus underrepresented groups,” she explained. “I’ve learned over time is that leadership comes in many different forms and very, very powerfully in *all* its forms.”

Lester continued, “A vision can be articulated quietly as well as loudly. Inspiration, encouragement and mentorship can be delivered in ways that don’t necessarily involve an iconic person standing alone at the front of the room. I think some of the most powerful kinds of leadership involve a quiet assist – through listening, deep collaboration, give and take. Qualities that are outside the leadership archetype, but that can be tremendously powerful skills for a leader to have; alternative ways of bringing people together towards a common goal.”

Addressing a New Reality

Asked about ways in which women can improve their position in the legal profession, Lester made a few impromptu suggestions:

- Adapt the partnership track. “People go to law school a little bit later in life now. So often the time when women are talking with their partners about whether or not to have a

child is now exactly the time when [law firm] partnership decisions are being made. So extending the partnership track – the duration of the period of being an associate – a little bit longer has been found to be a way of helping women get through that period. So they might have a child during that period, but then there's still some ramp left on the other end. They don't just disappear right at the time that they come up for partner. You can have a child, come back, get back on the track, and be considered after you've been able to get your ducks lined up again."

- **Act collectively.** A pressing question for women lawyers, Lester said, is: "How do I fulfill my obligations in the workplace as well as my obligations at home?" The best way to answer that question is by "working collectively, talking through and sharing your stories, and then finding mentors and sponsors – people you can cultivate to be advisors and coaches to you." When Lester was a young, untenured professor at UCLA, she and two colleagues successfully argued for a full semester's leave following childbirth. "We found that acting collectively helped us to do things that we wouldn't have been able to do alone." On a related note, she added, "there are some law firm committees that are very powerful, and others that are less powerful. On the Compensation Committee, for example, having women in numbers is really important. Rather than having one or two women on a 12-person committee, [it would be preferable to have] four women or five women, or a number that is at least proportional to the number of women who are entering the law firm's ranks, in order that they can speak with a more unified voice."
- **Guard against implicit bias.** "There are a lot of ways that implicit bias can creep into the process of assessing men's performance versus women's performance. The kinds of descriptions that are used for men are often things like 'fire in the belly.' The descriptions that more frequently come up for women who've been performing well include things like 'well-organized.'" The problem is, "while people might say about the woman who was very organized, 'Gosh, she doesn't seem to have fire in her belly!' the question isn't necessarily asked about the man who's got fire in his belly, "But was he well-organized? Did he meet the deadlines? Did he come with all of his documents in order?" The task is to make sure that *everybody* is responsible for *all* of those things. And if you don't perform on any of those qualities, then it's weighted equally. Or if you *do* perform well on any of those qualities, that's also weighted equally."
- **Be confident.** "It's really about confidence," Lester said. "What I wish for the next generation is that they have a deep belief that when they walk into a room, they have a place at the table. That they have the confidence to know they don't need to sit in the back row."

The Inaugural Women in Law Leadership Lecture was made possible by RWU Law's Presenting Sponsor, [Adler Pollock & Sheehan PC](#), along with our other law firm sponsor, [Cervenka Green & Ducharme LLC](#), and the generous individual support of [First Women honorees](#), Louise Durfee (1966), Nancy Marks Smith (1976), Carolyn Harvie Thompson (1960), and Myrth York (1977).