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Law School Deans Feel Heat From Rankings

Houston Law Center dean's resignation is another sign of growing pressure over 'U.S. News' stats

Leigh Jones
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NANCY RAPOPORT: She described the rankings as a "convenient weapon."

Nancy Rapoport was never a fan of law school rankings. Today, that's an understatement.

The former dean of University of Houston Law Center, who resigned last month after her school dropped five places in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, said that the law school's decline served as the final push from the position that she had held since 2000.

While Rapoport attributes long-running internal politics at the law school as the underlying reason for her departure, her resignation on the heels of this year's rankings represents the power that they hold over law deans, whose job performance can be at the mercy of the metric.

"I'm angry. I'm hurt," Rapoport said. She described the rankings as a convenient "weapon" used by some faculty members who had urged her ouster.

The Houston law school fell to 70th this year, compared with 65th last year and 59th the year before. In 2002, the school was ranked 50th.

The popularity of the annual rankings, used by prospective students, employers and job-searching scholars to gauge an institution's credibility, has meant that schools are funneling more resources to boost their placement.

It also means that deans can expect the ranking scorecard increasingly to serve as a measure of their individual job performance, said Jeffrey Stake, a law professor at the Indiana University School of Law-Bloomington.

"It's like firing the head coach," Stake said. "You can't fire the players, so you fire the coach." Stake has written about law school rankings and last year led a symposium at his school attended by judges and legal scholars.

Knee-jerk dismissals by universities in response to their law schools' unsatisfactory rankings may be futile, Stake said. Whether a dean is doing a good job often is not evident for years, he said. Raising funds, a dean's main function, is a slow process, he added, and as most deanships last only five to eight years, the effectiveness of their tenure can take much longer to measure.

"There's very little that they're in control of that will have an effect in the short term," he said.

THE 'FINAL STRAW?'

In some cases where deans have left, it is unclear to what extent a decline in ranking was the reason. But sagging results clearly do not earn them any gold stars and, instead, may become a final straw on a less-than-stellar tenure.

The incoming dean at Emory University School of Law, David Partlett, said that although the school's hiring team did not specifically say it they wanted him to improve Emory's rankings, doing so is a big concern for today's deans.

"The pressure's very intense," he said. "It's changed the whole economics of law schools." Partlett, currently the dean at Washington

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and Lee University School of Law, will assume the deanship at Emory on July 1.

Thomas Arthur, who has served as dean at Emory law school for three years, yielded his post last year following the school's nine-position plunge. Arthur said in an e-mail message last week that his departure was not related to Emory's ranking, and that he had discussed stepping down from the position with school officials before the rankings were published.

Also last year, Burnele Powell announced his resignation as dean at the University of South Carolina School of Law after serving two years. The school fell eight spots to 90th last year. Burnele did not return a phone call or an e-mail message seeking comment.

The incoming dean at University of Utah S.J. Quinney College of Law, Hiram Chodosh, acknowledged a connection between rankings and the length of a dean's stay, though he did not comment on his school specifically.

"Ignoring the rankings is something one does at great peril," he said. Chodosh, currently associate dean for academic affairs at Case Western Reserve University School of Law, will start his term at Utah in July. Part of a dean's role, he said, is to "attend to the indices" that *U.S. News & World Report* uses to evaluate schools. Utah law school fell 12 slots this year to 57th.

Chodosh is replacing Scott Matheson, Utah's dean for eight years, who announced his departure last summer. Chodosh attributed the rankings slump to the school's transition period.

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