

A Short History of the American Law Deans Association

In 1994, a group of 14 law school deans circulated a letter to deans of all law schools approved by the American Bar Association. The letter stated the deans' concerns that the process of accrediting law schools – ABA approval and AALS membership – had become unduly intrusive, burdensome, and unrelated to the actual quality of legal education. The deans noted that accreditation had become mainly focused on the inputs to legal education – such as space in the library or the level of pay for faculty – and that accreditation seemed increasingly to apply the same input formula regardless of the nature and mission of the particular school. Further, almost all schools at that time failed to garner full, unqualified approval from the accrediting organizations, but once approved schools almost never lost accreditation. Indeed, in roughly three-quarters of a century of accreditation, the ABA had only once revoked its approval, and that turned out to be short-lived. The 14 deans asked other deans to come together to discuss whether and how deans might induce the accrediting organizations to revise the accreditation process.

The deans of about 130 ABA approved schools did meet later that year in New Orleans. After discussing several issues of concern to the deans, discussion turned to the formation of a separate deans' organization, one that would be open solely to law school deans as members and that would serve as a voice for their interests. Shortly after that meeting, 21 law deans from a broad cross-section of American law schools formed the American Law Deans Association and invited other deans to join.

The organization adopted a Spartan approach to its administration, charging a very modest fee for membership, maintaining no staff apart from the assistant to the president of the organization, and setting formal meetings only once per year. The first Board of ALDA consisted of Ronald A. Cass, Boston University, President; Scott Bice, University of Southern California, Vice President; Harvey Perlman, University of Nebraska, Treasurer; Paul Brest, Stanford; Colin Diver, University of Pennsylvania; Henry Manne, George Mason University; Russell Osgood, Cornell; and Robert E. Scott, University of Virginia.

Most of the first several years of ALDA's existence, the Board and members were absorbed in pressing for revision of ABA rules and procedures and in debates over the recodification process adopted by the ABA. ALDA members coalesced around a group of proposals for changing ABA rules and procedures, and ALDA leadership spent considerable time discussing these proposals with those in leadership positions within the ABA. Over the succeeding years, in addition to its work on accreditation rules and procedures, ALDA addressed a number of other topics of interest to law school deans, among them participating in hearings before the U.S. Department of Education, working with judges' organizations on rationalizing the clerkship application process, confronting problems with law school rankings, and filing an amicus brief in litigation over law school admissions standards related to diversity.

Past Presidents of ALDA, following Ronald Cass, have been Scott Bice, University of Southern California; Robert Scott, University of Virginia; Jeff Lehman, University of Michigan; Kent Syverud, Vanderbilt University; and Saul Levmore of Chicago. The Association now represents more than 140 law deans.