Welcome to The Dean’s Office. I know that law school deans are not particularly popular on Above The Law, so what am I doing here? In January, I met Elie after he spoke about media and communications in the internet era at the annual conference of all the law schools. We had an interesting conversation (he’s much nicer in person than in print!) and he later asked me to write an occasional column about legal education topics from a dean’s perspective. So for now, I’ll be appearing here every other week.

I have been a law professor since 1988 and a dean (at two different schools) since 2001. In addition to my regular job, I have been involved in legal education reform. I recently served for six years as a volunteer member of the ABA Section of Legal Education’s Standards Review Committee (more on that in future columns) and currently serve on the ABA President’s Task Force on the Future of Legal Education.

These are the most tumultuous times in legal education that many of us have ever seen. The elements of the current crisis are well known. The job market for our graduates has been very rough since the Great Recession. We have learned that law firm jobs were declining even before then, as the impact of changes in the profession, globalization, and technology began to be felt….

Applications to law schools have plummeted and next year schools may enroll about as many first year students as there were when I started law school in 1981. Of course, law school (like all of higher education) is far more expensive today, so our graduates are facing very large debt burdens. The new federal income-based repayment program will provide some real relief, but it is not a complete answer to the fundamental cost issues. The perennial complaint that law schools do not adequately prepare students for the practice of law is more salient than ever (even though we are actually much better at this than in the past), because employers are less interested in training new lawyers and those without jobs are more frequently opening their own practices. Our regulatory systems (the ABA’s regulation of law schools and the states’ regulation of the practice of law) are too much designed to protect those in comfortable positions and not enough to spur competition and innovation.

So I do believe there is a crisis, and I am quite sympathetic to many of the critiques of legal education that you read on ATL and elsewhere. The thoughtful critics have helped to force us to shake off any lethargy about our environment. On the other hand, many of the most inflammatory things said about legal education and those who work in it are, in my view, exaggerated and often inaccurate. Most law schools deans, faculty, and staff I know work hard,
believe in what they do, care very much about students, and are trying to find ways to improve legal education. Most law students are pretty happy with their law school experience, as reflected in the results from the Law School Survey of Student Engagement. Much legal scholarship and other work by law professors make an important contribution to the pursuit of knowledge and justice.

Almost all law schools are in the process of changing significantly and, by the standards of the academic world, rapidly. Where we will wind up is very much up in the air. Right now we have more questions than answers. Some schools will probably adapt very effectively and will emerge in strong shape. Others will flounder and perhaps close.

In the weeks ahead, I hope to talk about these issues in a way that is fair and balanced (isn’t there a TV network that says that?). There will be those who disagree with some of what I write; others may disagree with everything. But as I said to Elie, it may be naïve, but I still believe that even in our overheated internet age, there is real value in serious dialogue on important topics. I look forward to our time together on ATL.