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## Baylor Law Dean Brad Toben Quietly Outpaces Texas Law School Dean Tenure

Toben has far outpaced the average of four years of service that most law deans put in and also beat all other Texas law deans by a long shot

By **Angela Morris** | June 29, 2018



**Dean Brad Toben, of Baylor University School of Law.**

In 1991 when Brad Toben became dean of Baylor University School of Law, the Lone Star State was headed by Texas Gov. Ann Richards, the U.S. president was George H.W. Bush and the Soviet Union dissolved, ending the Cold War.

Now on the job for more than 26 years, Toben is the second longest-serving law dean in the whole country, according to Rosenblatt's Deans Database, a repository of information about law

deans at Mississippi College School of Law in Jackson. Toben's tenure is beat only by the first longest-serving dean, John O'Brien, the 30-year dean of New England Law Boston.

Toben has far outpaced the average of four years of service that most law deans put in and also beat all other Texas law deans by a long shot. In fact, the Texas dean who comes closest is South Texas College of Law Houston dean Donald Guter, who is the 21st longest-serving law dean with nine years of service and who plans to retire next year.

“I love my work,” Toben said. “It’s not a matter of length of years, it’s a matter of can you make a contribution that moves the institution forward. I hope to have a blessing of doing that a lot more years.”

Law professor David Guinn, who’s taught at Baylor for 51 years, said that Toben has made a tremendous amount of progress as dean by building the school’s endowment income, upgrading its physical building and doubling its faculty. Toben’s relationship with Baylor’s faculty and staff is constructive and close, and employees deeply respect him.

“Dean Toben in my 51 years has done a superb job of administering this law school and has brought it up tremendously,” he said. “We have indeed made a lot of improvements in that period of time, not the least of which is the high quality of young men and women we are bringing in the program.”

Jim Rosenblatt, a professor and dean emeritus at Mississippi College School of Law who maintains the deans database, wrote in an email that typical law deans serve just four years for many reasons—they might want to return to teaching, take another deanship or higher education position, or retire. The main reason is being dean is tough and demanding and most deans can’t keep up the time commitment and energy for lengthy periods.

But a lengthy tenure benefits a school—the dean becomes close with alumni and the wider legal community, wields greater influence with the university’s administration and the school can focus on its work without leadership worries, Rosenblatt said.

“Dean Toben has been remarkable in his leadership over the years and is one of the primary reasons his school continues to be so widely respected and regarded. He has an amazing ability to do all parts of his job so well and continues to bring freshness and energy to his work each day,” he said.

## **Baylor is Home**

Toben finished his political science undergraduate degree in two and a half years in St. Louis, Missouri, his hometown. He felt ready to start his law school career as soon as possible. He saw a flier on a bulletin board advertising Baylor Law’s unique quarter system and realized he could start his legal education faster there than anywhere else.

“If you asked me then where Baylor was located, I would not have been able to tell you,” Toben recalled. “I showed up in February and started law school here sight unseen.”

Despite the initial unfamiliarity, Toben said he fell in love with Baylor. He rushed through law school in two years, earning his J.D. in 1977, when he was just 22.

“I do not know what my rush was,” he noted. “I would not have done it again, and I don’t even know what I was thinking.”

Toben went on to earn a master in law degree from Harvard University in 1981. It was always in his mind that he wanted to teach the law, and he entered his academic career at Indiana University School of Law-Indianapolis.

A couple of years later, in 1983, he jumped at the opportunity to return to Baylor as a professor. He spent eight years teaching commercial law, bankruptcy and reorganization before he became dean in 1991.

At the time, he was only 36 with a young family. He and his wife, Beth—now a prosecutor in the Limestone County Attorney’s Office in Waco—had been married for nine years and had a three-year-old son, John, at home. After four years as dean, the couple also had a daughter, Sarah Beth.

Toben said one of his great joys now is that Sarah Beth is a second-year law student at Baylor.

“A bunch of people don’t know how long he’s been there, which is crazy, because he’s so quite and humble and good at his job,” Sarah Beth said.

She recalls visiting her dad at work as a little girl to steal candy and hang out with his assistant, Laura Obenoskey—who’s been working for Toben for 26 years. Later, she would crash in her dad’s office during her summer break from school, in lieu of attending summer camps, to watch TV, visit a nearby museum that boasted a kids’ area with an archaeological exhibit, or do fun stuff in the office—like shred papers, she explained.

“He’d take me out to lunch sometimes, or he would take off and we would go do something fun,” Sarah Beth said.

After she decided to attend law school, she said did her own research and settled on Baylor because of it’s high bar passage rate and the fact that Baylor employees’ children receive a tuition discount.

“I go into his office weekly and talk about how his day is going, or he will ask how my day is,” she said.

There’s not much chance Toben will ever teach his daughter in class—he doesn’t teach much anymore, aside from one section of a constitutional law course, just because he enjoys it. Mostly Toben works with Baylor’s faculty and staff, and travels a lot to meet with alumni to seek gifts and encourage philanthropy for the law school.

It’s that work with alumni which enabled Toben to reach some of his major accomplishments during his long deanship.

Alumni donations funded Baylor’s new law center, finished in 2001 for \$35 million.

“I’m so proud of the law center—it was a huge undertaking,” he recalled. “I’m always quick to add that Baylor law school is not the building—the physical facility—it’s what happens inside.”

On the inside, Toben over the years expanded the school’s faculty by double, from 15 to 32 law professors, said Guinn. Toben said the curriculum expanded, too, and the school launched a writing center, revved up its pro bono and public service programs, created leadership and professional development programs, and more.

A lot of the expansion was possible because Toben has grown the law school’s endowment so much. An endowment is donated money or other assets that a school invests to earn income, which is then spent on the school.

Guinn said Baylor’s former law dean told him the endowment was \$875,000 around the time that Toben took over. Toben said it now stands around \$120 million, which ranks Baylor’s endowment at No. 28 among the 204 accredited U.S. law schools.

Toben said he grew the endowment so much through his friendships and relationships with alumni. After four or five years as dean—a time when many law schools change leaders—was when Toben said his relationships were just solidifying. The continuity of his 26 years as dean has made those connections keep growing, he said.

Even though being a law dean can be a stressful, difficult job, Toben, now 63, said he hangs in there because he likes helping other people succeed.

“I get a joy out of being a small part of perhaps helping people succeed in what they want to do in life. That brings to me a tremendous satisfaction I get day by day by day,” he said.

*Angela Morris is a freelance journalist. Follow her on Twitter at @AMorrisReports*