

# POINT OF VIEW

A Women's History Month  
roundtable discussion  
with women deans  
at Texas law schools.

MODERATED BY **BRITNEY E. HARRISON**

Of the 10 accredited law schools in Texas, four of them currently have women deans. They are Joan R.M. Bullock, Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law; Jennifer Collins, SMU Dedman School of Law; Felecia Epps, UNT Dallas College of Law; and Patricia Roberts, St. Mary's University School of Law. As of 2016, there were 61 women holding the position of law school dean across the nation. That represented about 30% of all deans. That number is continuing to rise. Texas is staying ahead of the national average with 40% of its law school deans being women.

In celebration of Women's History Month, these deans have offered incredible insight into their path to leadership and the rise of women in the legal profession.

**MODERATOR:** Thank you all for volunteering your time and participating in this roundtable discussion. I will start with the first question:

## What was your path to becoming a law school dean?

**DEAN BULLOCK:** I became interested in administration some years after I was tenured and achieved the rank of full professor. I joined the administrative ranks first as an associate dean of teaching and faculty development and then as the associate dean of academic affairs. Through these two positions, my vision of leading a law school developed as I gained insight and perspective on the how and why of law school operations.

**DEAN COLLINS:** I began my academic career at Wake Forest University, where I was a member of the law faculty teaching criminal law and procedure, family law, and gender and the law. I served on a university-wide task force with a member of the provost's office team who suggested that I consider stepping into her role when she returned to the faculty. The next thing I knew, I was in the provost's office working in university leadership and found I absolutely loved helping our students, faculty, and staff achieve their personal and professional dreams. When SMU asked if I would consider the deanship, it was an incredibly exciting opportunity because of the school's tremendous reputation, its extraordinary location in Dallas, and the opportunity to focus on some of the external aspects of the job such as fundraising and alumni relations. I like to tell the story of how I unexpectedly ended up in university leadership to our students, because it is a demonstration of the important role that serendipity can play in your career journey and also that you should listen when someone identifies a potential path for you that you might not even have considered for yourself.

**DEAN EPPS:** I started my career as a U.S. Marine Corps officer and Navy Judge Advocate. I did not plan to enter academia or to become a law school dean. After leaving active duty, I accepted a position with Georgia Legal Services Program, or GLSP, managing the Albany, Georgia, office of GLSP. Community service is important to me, and GLSP gave me the opportunity to provide free legal assistance to low-income Georgians. I left GLSP to accept an offer as visiting professor for one year at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock William H. Bowen School of Law to teach in a mental health law clinic. The clinic aided low-income people with diagnosed mental illnesses. I found that I enjoyed teaching and working with students.

The one-year visit turned into 17 years as a law professor at Bowen. I was selected for a tenure-track position, earning tenure and promotion before serving as associate dean for academic affairs. I enjoy administrative work and leadership positions. I was encouraged to apply to become a dean by one of the deans I worked with as associate dean. After applying for several positions, I identified the type of school I wanted to lead—one committed to diversity, public service, and to

providing opportunities to those who would not normally have access to legal education. Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University College of Law, or FAMU COL, a Historically Black College or University, has a mission that fits my interests. I served as dean of FAMU COL for one-and-a-half years. I accepted the position as dean at UNT Dallas College of Law because the mission likewise fits my interests. My path was the result of seizing unexpected opportunities. Consequently, I encourage others to have a plan but to always be on the lookout for unexpected opportunities.

**DEAN ROBERTS:** Following graduation from William & Mary Law School in Williamsburg, Virginia, I practiced civil litigation for eight years. I then became an assistant dean and instructor at William & Mary, eventually becoming an associate dean. After about 10 years, the faculty asked me to apply for a clinical faculty position. I was hired as a clinical faculty member and director of clinics. After starting and teaching in clinics focused on special education advocacy and veterans' benefits, I served as vice dean for three years. In the third year, I applied to become a dean and found my place at St. Mary's University.

### **What were some of the issues you faced as a woman in law school?**

**DEAN BULLOCK:** This is a complicated question to answer as I perceive others react to me first as a person of color. Consequently, I find it difficult in trying to separate issues I have faced as a woman divorced from issues I face as a person of color. I went to law school during the time of affirmative action. I did not feel in law school that others thought I did not belong there; rather, my issues related to others being surprised by my intelligence and ability to compete on their level. Affirmative action operated in a system of exclusion where it was my job to convince or prove to others that I should be included. The biggest challenge in such a system is that exclusion, by definition, limits one's knowledge of what is available and therefore, there is a limit on the opportunities that can be pursued, or in my case, of which I could seek out to prove my competence for eligibility consideration. I did not know what I did not know, and my network was small and made up of those who were themselves neither mature in the field nor well-connected.

**DEAN COLLINS:** I have found that male students in general are more comfortable asserting themselves—speaking in class, seeking out mentors, and putting themselves up for jobs where they might not meet every single qualification. I certainly fell into the group who did not seek out mentors or sponsors as often as I should have, and thus feel incredibly lucky that my career has unfolded in the wonderful way that it has. If I could do it again, I would try to be more intentional in taking advantage of some of the terrific resources and faculty my law school offered to me.

**DEAN EPPS:** I don't feel that I faced any specific issues in

law school because of my gender. Law school is a rigorous and challenging experience for most students. It was that way for me.

I faced gender-related issues while I was on active duty as a Marine in the 1980s. At that time, there were a variety of gender-based restrictions imposed on women. Women could not be pilots, serve in infantry units, or participate in offensive combat. In the summer of 1979, I graduated from U.S. Marine Corps Officer Candidates School. The top woman candidate in my platoon was removed from the honor guard in our graduation parade because at that time a woman could not be part of an honor guard. Fortunately, restrictions such as these have been removed.

**DEAN ROBERTS:** My entering class at William & Mary Law was the first one comprising more than 50% women; I still remember them announcing that to us on the first day. It was 1989, and in those subsequent three years, I never felt marginalized because of my gender while studying law, largely because of the heroines who paved a way for us long before there was a majority of women studying law. My undergraduate institution was a women's college, so I came in with confidence and leadership experience, so running for positions and leading organizations did not seem unusual either.

### **What are the issues that women in law school face today and how does your law school empower them to address those issues at law school and throughout their careers?**

**DEAN BULLOCK:** The issue of navigating within a system of exclusion still exists. Knowledge is indeed power and the retention of knowledge by the powerful diminishes the necessity of physical barriers to exclude. Technology, however, has leveled the playing field somewhat, making it easier for women to find the knowledge resources they need to succeed in law school and in their careers. Women, in recent years, also outnumber men as law students, making it more commonplace in law school to see women in student leadership, participants in academic and social activities, and as recipients of plum research assignments, awards in competitions, and good career opportunities. Notwithstanding, this level of leadership, equality, and increased visibility is frequently not translated into success in the legal profession. Women lawyers still have earnings inequity, fewer promotion and partner opportunities, and less prominence in certain practice areas than men. On the whole, men are better paid and are more represented in transactional practice areas while women predominate in the lower-paid service practice areas. Law schools must pivot to educating women on how to overcome these barriers to their success concomitant with educating the profession on how to develop a more inclusionary practice that benefits both lawyers and clients and adds to its bottom line. With the former, law schools must provide the resources and the safe space for women to self-inventory and determine what they must learn, do, and become before leaving law school and what they can expect and have required of them after leaving law school. Thurgood Marshall Law, through its Office of Career, Professional Development & Diversity Initiatives, has workshops and mentoring

programs that prepare students for the realities of the practice and the world of work. At Thurgood Marshall Law, we know it is more than just getting a job; it's about having a life and helping students comprehend that getting that life is heavily influenced by what they bring to the table and their ability to present and be their best self. Further, law schools must partner with practitioners, both women and men, and have them inform and mentor women on the landscape of the practice, the culture of firms, and what they must do if they want successful careers. In pivoting to educate the profession, law schools can educate law firms, legal departments, and others on the benefits of being diverse and inclusive and can work with them in developing new organizational and operational policies and approaches that support the diversity of the workforce and the unique perspectives of that diversity.

**DEAN COLLINS:** I think women are still forced to walk an incredibly narrow tightrope in terms of bringing power and confidence to the workplace while avoiding being labeled as too bossy or overpowering. And so many lawyers today are facing overwhelming challenges in balancing their work and family lives, an issue on which I hoped we would be much further along by now. I am thrilled that thanks to an incredibly generous donor, SMU Dedman School of Law is launching a new women's leadership initiative to address issues such as retaining women in the legal profession, elevating women in leadership positions, and enhancing rainmaking and networking skills.

**DEAN EPPS:** I don't think women in law school face issues different from those faced by men—law school is a demanding program that requires maximum effort by all who undertake it. At UNT Dallas College of Law women have the opportunity to fill leadership roles in student organizations, serve as research assistants to faculty, and engage in a wide variety of community service. Each of these activities helps them to hone their leadership ability. Women on our faculty, including both the dean and the associate dean, serve as role models. We train women to be advocates for themselves and others. This will serve them well as they enter the workforce.

**DEAN ROBERTS:** Women in law school face time management and work-life balance issues just as they will during practice, challenges with which their male colleagues also struggle. Regardless of gender, law school students often experience mental health issues that include anxiety, depression, and sometimes substance use—conditions that worsen in practice. Partnering with student organizations, we develop programming and resources to help students manage these and other issues, such as impostor syndrome. We started a first-generation bootcamp, and we have both peer and community mentoring programs, the latter with the San Antonio Bar Association, to help students manage law school and professional development.

**According to the 2020 Population Trends of Women in the State Bar of Texas report, women attorneys currently make up 37% of the State Bar of Texas**

**membership. This is a 39% growth over the past 10 years. By 2022, women attorneys are projected to make up 40% of the State Bar of Texas membership. Are you seeing these same trends in law school classes and if so, what do you believe is the catalyst for the increase?**

**DEAN BULLOCK:** Yes, women are comprising a larger percentage of the student body and are the majority at Thurgood Marshall Law. I believe the catalyst for this increase is that women want to become masters of their own destiny and they must be the change they want to see in the world. They can no longer wait as men make decisions about the quality of their lives and the legitimacy of their dreams. Lawyers are leaders and the knowledge and skills that come from having a law degree enhance the potential of being impactful in any field a woman chooses to join for a career.

**DEAN COLLINS:** We are seeing an increasing number of women in our law school classes (for example, our current L1 class is 57% women), but those increased numbers are not translating into equivalent gains at the very top ranks of the profession—women are still not close to achieving parity in the ranks of equity partners, general counsels, or law school deanships. We really need to take a hard look at the ways we retain, mentor, and promote women attorneys.

**DEAN EPPS:** UNT Dallas College of Law accepted its first class in 2014. The composition of our entering classes has been about 50% women since we opened our doors. In some years, for instance in fall 2021, we have had more women (56%) in our first-year class than men. I think this is partially explained by the increased number of role models, including women law deans, allowing women to see a career in law as attainable.

**DEAN ROBERTS:** Since 2018 at St. Mary's Law, each entering class included a majority of women. In our nearly 100-year history, only 100 women graduated during the first 40 years; in the next 45 years, there were 4,025 women graduates. In 2020-2021, as I became the law school's second female dean, all 10 additional leadership positions in our alumni associations, law ministry, law journals, Student Bar Association, and advocacy teams were held by women. As the number of women in legal education, law firms, corporations, nonprofits, and government increase, they mentor and help pave the way for the women who follow.

**Thank you all for your insight and for sharing your journeys. One final question: What advice would you give to 1) women law students; 2) new women attorneys; and 3) women juggling the responsibilities of self-care, family, and the practice of law, so that they remain active in our profession throughout their journey?**

**DEAN BULLOCK:** First, for all, I would tell them that

they can have it all, just not all at once. Second, they should determine what they want to accomplish early on—preferably, before they join the profession and get sidetracked, sidelined, and detoured. The more women know about what they want, the more they can be proactive and focused in seeking out what they need and who they need to know and contact to successfully navigate the obstacles and stay the course. Knowing that there are landmines and getting the tools to discern, diffuse, or sidestep them is part of the job. Third, show up and speak up. For several women, speaking up is difficult, especially for themselves. In those cases, I recommend taking themselves on as their client, and advocate for themselves. It's a bit out-of-body thinking, but it works.

**DEAN COLLINS:** I would tell both students and new attorneys first to believe that you belong—that the profession is so lucky to have you as part of it, and we need your unique talents and perspectives and skillsets to enhance our profession and our communities. Second, don't be afraid to take a chance—your career is going to unfold in surprising ways that you cannot even imagine right now, so apply for that job, reach out to an attorney who inspires you to have a conversation, attend that conference—you never know where new opportunities are going to unfold. In terms of juggling it all, I am not sure I have that balance quite right even now! I am incredibly blessed to have three amazing kids and a terrific and supportive husband who has a very exciting legal career of his own, and there have certainly been many times when we felt like we were dropping every single ball we were trying to juggle. But looking back on it now with some hindsight (hopefully my three are all about to graduate from college), I can say that “the kids are going to be all right.” They always knew they were my absolute top priority, and I think (and hope!) they are very proud to have a working mom who always tried my hardest to be the very best mom and attorney that I can be. There will be days and weeks that are so unbelievably challenging, but in the bigger picture, it's going to work out.

**DEAN EPPS:** I would advise woman law students and new women attorneys to work hard and take advantage of unexpected opportunities that present themselves along the way. I recommend that they seriously consider each opportunity even if it appears to them that they don't quite have the skill set for that opportunity. They may be wrong but will never know unless they pursue the opportunity.

I would also advise them to identify mentors early in their careers. It is important to have a trusted person who has already walked the path to provide guidance along the way. It is important to be spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically healthy in order to be effective in personal and professional roles. My mother frequently reminds me to “take good care of yourself, you belong to you.” I advise women to establish and maintain a schedule that includes time for self-care and family.

**DEAN ROBERTS:** My advice is while you do not have to do it all alone, you may have to ask for help. Whether it is professors, administrators or staff at your law school, or colleagues with whom you practice or whose practice you admire, or alumni from your law school and members of local bar associations, we all want to help you succeed. Get involved with student organizations, mentoring programs, bar, alumni and nonprofit organizations. Build relationships and do great work and reach out when you need advice or wise counsel. We have all been there and want to pay it forward! **TBJ**



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is an associate of Goranson Bain Ausley, in Dallas, where she practices family law. She is the current immediate past president of the Texas Young Lawyers Association and served on the board of directors. She served as vice president of the Austin Black Lawyers Association, a director of the Austin Young Lawyers Association, and a participant in the ABA/YLA Leadership Academy. Harrison is a graduate of the State Bar's LeadershipSBOT Class of 2015-2016 and is a fellow of the Texas Bar Foundation. She graduated summa cum laude from the University of North Texas in 2006 and with honors from the University of Texas School of Law in 2010.



**JOAN R.M. BULLOCK**

is the dean of Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law. A Michigan lawyer and CPA, she is a past chair of the American Bar Association Law Practice Division, or LP. Additionally, Bullock is a fellow of the American Bar Foundation and serves in leadership as secretary of the Council of the ABA Section of Science and Technology Law.



**JENNIFER COLLINS**

is the Judge James Noel Dean at SMU Dedman School of Law. She is also the president-elect of Rhodes College, where she will begin her service on July 1. Collins received her B.A. cum laude from Yale University and her J.D. magna cum laude from Harvard Law School, where she served as a notes editor for the *Harvard Law Review*. Prior to joining SMU, she was a law professor and the vice provost at Wake Forest University. Collins had an extensive career in practice, including serving in the Office of Legal Counsel at the U.S. Department of Justice and as an assistant U.S. attorney in Washington, D.C., specializing in homicide cases.



**FELECIA EPPS**

has served as dean of the UNT Dallas College of Law since July 2018. She has been in legal academia for 21 years. Epps served as a judge advocate in the U.S. Marine Corps and managed the Albany Office of Georgia Legal Services Program before becoming a law professor. She is from Lonoke, Arkansas.



**PATRICIA ROBERTS**

is the 10th dean of St. Mary's University School of Law. A legal educator for two decades, her works as a clinical educator involved supervising law students providing pro bono assistance to those in need. Roberts practiced law for eight years after earning her law degree from William & Mary Law School. She returned to her alma mater as a clinical professor of law and director of clinical programs and served as vice dean before joining St. Mary's. Roberts has been a U.S. leader in legal efforts to aid veterans and was the inaugural president of the Board of the National Law School Veterans Clinic Consortium.