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1996

## Introduction to *The ILR School at Fifty: Voices of the Faculty, Alumni, and Friends*

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# Introduction to *The ILR School at Fifty: Voices of the Faculty, Alumni, and Friends*

## **Abstract**

[Excerpt] Today the school's faculty is as strong as it has ever been. It consists of renowned researchers and accomplished practitioners who are, at the same time, dedicated to their students and to classroom teaching. Our students are outstanding—so outstanding that I wonder if I could be admitted if I were applying today! Our extension and outreach programs serve 30,000 adults every year and are the envy of all our academic competitors. As we look to the future we know we have a solid foundation on which to build.

In dreams begin responsibilities. The dream that Irving Ives and a handful of others had over half a century ago ultimately became the preeminent institution of its type in the world. I have had the honor and privilege of being the first ILR alumnus to serve as dean of the school, and I am acutely conscious of the profound responsibility borne by all of us who love the school—the responsibility to preserve the great legacy of the last 50 years by ensuring that the school is well prepared for the 21st century.

## **Keywords**

ILR School, industrial and labor relations, history, faculty, education

## **Disciplines**

Higher Education | Human Resources Management | Labor History | Labor Relations

## **Comments**

### **Suggested Citation**

Lipsky, D. B. (1996). Introduction [Electronic version]. In E. Goldberg (Ed.), *The ILR School at fifty: Voices of the faculty, alumni, and friends* (pp. 1-8). Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.

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# 1.

## INTRODUCTION

*by David B. Lipsky*

**S**t the beginning of the 1994 fall term, the ILR School's entire freshman class—160 students—boarded several buses, each of which headed off to a different destination where students went on a plant tour. On one of the buses Professor Robert Hebdon and I rode with a group of 23 students to the Martin Marietta plant in Syracuse. As I road the bus to Syracuse, my mind drifted back in time....

Exactly 35 years earlier, when I was an undergraduate at the ILR School, I had taken the same trip with my ILR classmates to the same site. All alumni of my era remember with fondness ILR's famous "busriding" course. In those years, students in that course visited as many as eight sites during the semester. I especially remember our visit to an anthracite coal mine in Scranton. At the mine site we crowded into an open elevator and dropped 800 feet into the bowels of the earth. We then trekked through ever-narrowing tunnels to the "face" of the mine, where we observed at firsthand the difficult and dangerous work of the miners. My memories of that visit, and of the others we made that semester, will never fade.

### Changes in the Curriculum

In the 1960s busriding was dropped from our curriculum, along with other courses my classmates and I had been required to take; other courses were added. Every decade or so the ILR faculty has undertaken a major revision of the undergraduate curriculum. During my term as dean we spent about three years developing the latest one. The effort was led by Associate Dean Bob Smith (although many faculty, students, and alumni gave invaluable assistance). Our revised curriculum blends the new and the old. The core professional curriculum is retained, although suitably updated. (The labor law requirement, for example, is now a labor and *employment* law course.) Students are also required to take at least one course in international and comparative industrial relations. The new curriculum adds requirements in math, science, the Western intellectual tradition (shades of Milton Konvitz!), and "cultural perspectives" (students will choose one course on non-Western societies from a menu).

A truly innovative feature of the new ILR curriculum is the Freshman Colloquium. A chronic problem at Cornell is the difficult adjustment freshmen are required to make to life at a large, complex, and competitive university. Freshmen are, by and large, thrown into large classes and left to their own devices. They

ordinarily have precious little contact with faculty. ILR freshmen have always benefitted from being part of one of Cornell's smaller colleges, but otherwise have endured most of the same problems as other Cornell freshmen. Moreover, ILR students said they needed a first-year course that gave them an introduction to our field—a brief survey that at least gave them some feel for the "big picture."

The Freshman Colloquium is an attempt to address these concerns. It is a required, one-credit-hour course in which the entering class is divided into sections of 10 to 12 students apiece. Each section is taught by a different ILR faculty member—about 15 of our finest faculty have been participating. Each participating professor then serves as advisor to the students in his or her section. During the 1994 Colloquium faculty and students discussed the nature and meaning of work, the pros and cons of multicultural education, and the ins and outs of a Cornell and ILR education.

And the 1994 Colloquium also resurrected busriding, despite the formidable challenges of mounting plant tours for students. Bob Smith and Assistant Dean Jim McPherson spent many, many hours organizing the 1994 excursions. In an era of shrinking budgets, deans tend to worry about the expense of transporting 160 students hither and yon. And considering the university's potential liability, it is hard to imagine getting permission nowadays to take students into the deep recesses of a coal mine, even if an operating mine currently existed within hailing distance of Ithaca! Moreover, most of the plants students visited in a bygone era have long since closed—it is no secret that manufacturing has shriveled in upstate New York, so finding *any* sites worth visiting is no easy task. Nevertheless, many ILR faculty believe it more important than ever to give students exposure to the "real world," and the reincarnation of busriding is just one example of their efforts in that direction.

## **Changes in the Workplace**

At last Bob Hebdon and I, students in tow, arrived at the Syracuse plant. When we reached the reception area we were greeted by Jeff Burton (MILR '87), the plant's manager of labor relations and our host for the visit. For me, it was downright unsettling to visit the Martin Marietta plant. Echoes from the past almost overwhelmed me. In 1959 the same complex of buildings was owned by General Electric and called the GE Electronic Park. Thousands of workers labored on assembly lines producing television sets, refrigerators, and other appliances. By contrast, in 1994 fewer than 400 production workers were on the same premises, producing sophisticated radar and sonar systems for the U.S. military and, increasingly, for the Saudis, Pakistanis, and other foreign governments. (There were also, I hasten to add, about 3,000 engineers, designers, managers, and other white-collar employees employed at the Syracuse site.) A "high-performance work system" exists at the site: production workers are organized into teams and have flexible work assignments and very little supervision. Anticipated cuts in the U.S. defense budget almost guarantee further downsizing of the Syracuse facility. The day after we visited the plant—the very next day!—

Lockheed bought the Syracuse plant and Martin Marietta's defense systems business.

I think that story has great significance because it incorporates the themes of continuity and change that have marked the entire history of the ILR School. It cannot be denied that over the 50-year history of the school the workplace and the work force have changed dramatically. When I was an ILR student, we didn't discuss high-performance work systems, total quality management, downsizing, corporate takeovers, or international competition. Nor did we spend much time on the workplace problems of women and minorities: "work force diversity" and "multiculturalism" were terms that hadn't entered our vocabularies. The very small number of scholars who prophesied the decline of the labor movement (Daniel Bell was one) were greeted with skepticism and denial. On the other hand, not a single academic expert—I know because I've checked!—predicted the explosive growth of public sector unionism that occurred in the 1960s.

## **Change and Continuity**

Some alumni I encounter, out of touch with the school for many years, don't realize how much the school has changed. It is obvious, at least to me, that the school must continually change the content of its course offerings, its research agenda, and its other programs. It must do so because the world is continually changing, and the school must stay current and relevant. We cannot risk obsolescence—we cannot allow ourselves to become an academic dinosaur. Change is inevitable, if often difficult and even lamentable. It has always been my contention that the school must try to lead the way in our field, not simply follow the lead of others. Who was it who first said it was important "to try to stay on the cutting edge, but not on the bleeding edge"?

On the other hand (academics always have another hand), in the larger sense the school's core mission hasn't fundamentally changed since it was drawn up by Irving Ives in 1944. Simply stated, the school deals with the employment relationship in all of its manifold guises. We focus on the relations between managers and employees (or "capital and labor," if you prefer) at the workplace, within the work organization, and in the larger society. Although dramatic and even revolutionary changes have swept through the workplace, our core mission has an enduring and unchanging quality. Since the dawn of civilization there have been employment relationships, and it is probably safe to say there always will be.

That being the case, the school always has, and always will, focus on how to achieve both equity and efficiency in the employment relationship. (Some readers will recall that this was the theme of the school's 40th anniversary celebration.) The desire for equity, fairness, justice, and personal fulfillment, on the one hand, and efficiency, productivity, competitiveness, and performance, on the other, are constants that haven't changed much through history.

The study of industrial relations, as I define it, is the traditional and unchanging core mission of the ILR School. I cannot imagine that our field—

whatever name we give it—will be less important in the future than it has been in the past, because it deals with the most significant and profound issues that affect the well-being of individuals and societies. When I was a candidate for the deanship in 1988 I tried to articulate my vision of the school in these terms. I said the school needed to improve, to change, to strive for excellence in all its programs. But I also said the school needed to be faithful to its core mission and to its proud heritage.

When I became dean in 1988, I had the advantage of having served as associate dean for three years under the tutelage of Bob Doherty. Some remarkable advances had occurred during Bob's deanship: the school's first comprehensive "outside" review had been conducted by a committee chaired by Professor Jack Stieber of Michigan State; the outside review triggered an "inside" review, which Bob had asked Ron Ehrenberg to head; three important centers and institutes were established (the Smithers Institute, the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies, and the Institute of Collective Bargaining); planning for a new library proceeded (although funding for the project remained stalled in Albany); and preliminary plans were laid for the school's participation in the university's pending capital campaign. Bob modestly gives the credit for these achievements to others, but I can testify that none of them would have happened without his steady leadership.

In this space I cannot attempt a history of the school during the years I've served as dean. Instead, I would like to focus on the efforts to secure new facilities for the ILR School.

## **Growth**

The late Shirley Harper, who served with distinction as the director of the Catherwood Library for 18 years, deserves much of the credit for pushing the building project ahead. Over the years, Shirley and her predecessors had built the Catherwood Library into the finest library of its type in the world. But by 1980 our collection had outgrown the existing facility. Shirley began to make the case for additional library space. The first serious planning for an expansion of the library occurred in 1983, while Chuck Rehmus was dean. At first planning focused only on the need for new library space, but later, during Bob Doherty's term of office, it was recognized that the school needed new classrooms and offices as well. The Ives Hall complex had been designed for a student population of about 400; by the 1980s the school enrolled close to 800. Moreover, new programs in both the extension and resident divisions put severe strains on office space. (It should be noted that the size of the resident faculty has not grown in over 40 years: it reached 50 or so in the early 1950s and has stayed at that level ever since. But this means that ILR's student/faculty ratio increased from 5:1 in the 1950s to 8:1 in the 1960s to 16:1 in the 1980s.) By 1990 one-third of the Catherwood collection was housed in an off-campus annex. In 30 years' time, the Ives Hall complex had become crowded, cluttered, and shabby.

In the summer of 1988 the logjam in Albany was broken and the state at last authorized \$12 million for the ILR building project. Over the next several years the State University Construction Fund, or SUCF (an arm of the State University of New York that oversees the construction of all buildings at Cornell's statutory colleges), hired architects and pushed the ILR project forward. The ILR School played an active role, working with the architects, SUCF officials, and experts from Cornell's facilities group, in developing the plans and designs for our new buildings. Assistant Dean Jon Levy, whom I had asked to serve as ILR's liaison with the architects, the state, and Cornell, oversaw all aspects of our involvement in the project. Working with Shirley Harper, Dave Eastman, and our faculty and staff, Jon carried out his assignment with skill, energy, and good humor. Over time the construction project grew in scope, and everyone realized that the initial budget would not be sufficient to provide the school with the facilities it needed. A Master Plan was developed that was divided into two parts: during Phase I the state would construct about 100,000 square feet of space, doubling the size of the Catherwood Library and providing all new classrooms for the school; during Phase II, the rest of the Ives Hall complex would be thoroughly renovated. Estimated cost of the Master Plan: \$35 to \$40 million, divided about equally between Phase I and Phase II.

I have pleasant memories of the numerous visits we made to the Manhattan offices of Beckhard, Richlan, the internationally renowned architectural firm that created the plans for our new buildings. Often as many as 15 people would sit around Beckhard, Richlan's large conference table, poring over numerous drawings, and debating the pros and cons of the plans' features. It was fun to be an amateur architect!

The plans for our new buildings had to be approved by both SUNY and Cornell. On the Cornell side, final approval was the responsibility of the university's Board of Trustees, which relies on recommendations made by its own Buildings and Properties (B. and P.) Committee. At each critical stage of the design process the B. and P. Committee reviewed the progress that had been made to date. These reviews were not merely *pro forma*; the committee is acutely conscious of its obligation to preserve the beauty of the campus for future generations of Cornellians and carefully scrutinizes the development of each capital project. On more than one occasion the trustees have decisively rejected plans submitted by the various Cornell colleges.

I was confident at each stage that Beckhard, Richlan had designed outstanding facilities for the school, but could not be certain that the B. and P. Committee would agree. Fortunately for the school, Anne Evans Gibbons (now Estabrook) has served on the committee for several years. Anne, ILR class of 1965, also serves on the ILR School's Advisory Council. Anne's expertise in construction and real estate came in handy when the school began to develop and seek financing for its new buildings. She offered advice and support from the earliest stages and, at the meetings of the B. and P. Committee, helped persuade her fellow trustees of the need for and value of our construction project.

In the winter of 1993 the plans for our new buildings were complete, and it was time for the state to move from authorization to appropriation of the capital funds needed for actual construction. To our shock and dismay, however, the ILR project was not included in the governor's capital budget for the new fiscal year. There was a danger that if we did not get the funds in fiscal 1993-94, the project might be delayed indefinitely or even killed. Consequently, Cornell launched a full-scale lobbying effort designed to persuade the legislature to restore the funding needed for our project.

## **Response to Danger**

At this stage several heroes emerged who helped to save our project. Cornell Vice President Henrik Dullea, who had previously served as Governor Cuomo's top aide, coordinated our lobbying efforts and lent his considerable expertise at every stage. Cornell President Frank Rhodes made the restoration of our funding his top legislative priority. I'll never forget the day in March 1993 when Frank, Hank, and I made a series of visits with key legislators, including Senator Ralph Marino, the majority leader in the senate, and Assemblyman Sol Weprin, the Speaker of the assembly. No one could articulate the ILR case better than our remarkable president! It was fascinating to watch Frank Rhodes and Hank Dullea working on behalf of the ILR School. I sat by dutifully during these meetings with legislators, and like a child at the dinner table, I spoke when I was spoken to.

In many ways the biggest hero of all was Senator James Lack of Suffolk County, who served at the time as the chair of the Senate Labor Committee. I first met Jim Lack when he was a principal speaker at ILR's 40th anniversary celebration in 1986. Two years later, after I became dean, Jon Levy and I visited Jim in his Albany office, and we renewed acquaintances. In short order Jim became the school's staunchest supporter and strongest advocate in Albany. It helped to have Connie Varcasia, a loyal ILR alum (class of 1979), as Jim's top staffer. But I honestly believe that Jim's unwavering support of the school is based on his unsullied, nonpartisan view of the school's value to New York's economy and its labor-management community. In the winter of 1993, no one fought harder to save the ILR project than Jim Lack. Yet, I hasten to add that, although Jim has worked very hard for the school over the years, he has never asked for a single favor in return.

We also had another ally sitting in an office near the governor's: Elizabeth Moore, the governor's chief counsel. Liz is also an ILR alum (class of 1975), a past member of the school's Advisory Council, and one of the most capable public servants I know. On our building project, and on numerous other matters, Liz was always a source of guidance and advice. I also need to pay tribute to Assemblyman Marty Luster and Senator James Seward, both of whom represent the Ithaca area in Albany. Marty and Jim, like Liz Moore and Jim Lack, have always done everything they could, within the limits of propriety, to protect the interests of the school.



The labor movement also came to our assistance, as it has on countless occasions. On a snowy day in February 1993 Associate Dean Ron Seeber and I visited with Art Baker, head of the building trades in the Ithaca area, to discuss how he and his members might help. Art plunged into the effort with alacrity, enlisting the support of the building trades statewide in our cause.

Ed Cleary, President of the New York State AFL-CIO, and Paul Cole, the Secretary-Treasurer of the "State Fed" and also a member of the Cornell Board of Trustees, were especially committed to ILR's cause. Each March the State Fed holds a legislative conference in Albany, attended by top policymakers and legislators, as well as scores of labor leaders. The governor, the speaker, and the majority leader are usually on the agenda. The conference always focuses on labor's top legislative and budgetary priorities. Ron Seeber, Jon Levy, and I usually attend this conference because it gives us a chance to discuss the school's programs with top labor and public officials. At the March 1993 conference we had the special pleasure of sitting in the large audience while first President Cleary, then Senator Lack, and then others came to the podium to extol the virtues of the ILR School and to emphasize the necessity of restoring funding of the school's construction project in the state's capital budget.

Subsequently, an amendment was added to the capital budget, sponsored by Senator Lack, that restored our funding. The capital budget was then passed by the senate and assembly and, ultimately, signed by the governor. Later, to my surprise, I was reliably informed that in the long history of New York State, the governor's capital budget had never been successfully amended in this fashion.

## **Fulfillment of a Dream**

Receiving the appropriation for our new buildings is by no means the end of the story, but the remaining chapters will have to be written on another day. Now, as I write this chapter in 1994, across the school's lower courtyard from my office, the construction project is well under way. Soon the classroom building will be demolished and brand new, world-class facilities will be built where the old classrooms stood. By 1997 the school will be occupying its new buildings and, we hope, launching Phase II of the project. Shirley Harper's dream, which in time came to be shared by so many others, will have become a reality.

For years the thought had lingered in my mind: "In dreams begin responsibilities." For me the thought had profound resonance. When I became dean I began to use the quote in my talks. Irving Ives had a dream—a dream of an institution of higher education of a type that had never before existed. Maurice Neufeld, Jean McKelvey, and the other founding faculty members shared that dream. They came to the Cornell campus after World War II and created a living institution out of a dream. When Maurice and Jean first arrived on campus in 1946 the school consisted of a handful of faculty borrowed from other Cornell colleges and a small number of transfer students (mostly ex-GIs), but no buildings, no curriculum, no extension programs, no research programs, and very few precedents on which to rely.

The school's founders faced resistance and skepticism, both inside and outside Cornell. The naysayers said the school would fail—that it could not possibly succeed. But the founding faculty, with help from Cornell President Edmund Ezra Day, persevered and built an esteemed institution that served as a model for all of higher education—and continues to do so today.

The dream lives on—and so do the responsibilities. The school faces the future with optimism, aware that it will encounter challenges, but confident of its ability to overcome them. As I write, the school is in the midst of a strategic planning effort, designed to prepare us for the 21st century. I once heard Jean McKelvey say, "When Maurice and I came to Ithaca we thought New York State was the school's classroom. Increasingly the nation became our classroom. And today the world is our classroom." The school is planning for the future with Jean's thought in mind. The school will continue to balance its core responsibility to New York State against the growing necessity of being a global institution.

The school will also continue to be a nonpartisan institution that serves *both* the management and labor communities, as well as the public in general. We will continue to educate professionals who work as representatives of labor, management, and the public. Some skeptics still doubt that an institution can educate people who work on both sides of the table. I find it ironic that some of these skeptics never question the ability of law schools to educate both prosecuting and defense attorneys. Irving Ives believed professionals were needed by all the parties involved in employment relations, and he dreamt of a school that could be *both* pro-labor and pro-management—of a school that would cooperate with all parties to enhance the quality of employment relations.

Today the school's faculty is as strong as it has ever been. It consists of renowned researchers and accomplished practitioners who are, at the same time, dedicated to their students and to classroom teaching. Our students are outstanding—so outstanding that I wonder if I could be admitted if I were applying today! Our extension and outreach programs serve 30,000 adults every year and are the envy of all our academic competitors. As we look to the future we know we have a solid foundation on which to build.

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