Michael Dorf: Michael I. Sovern Professor of Law at Columbia University School of Law and Author of *No Litmus Test: Law versus Politics in the Twenty-First Century*  
[By Jen Woods]

Michael Dorf, the Michael I. Sovern Professor of Law at Columbia University School of Law, said his mentors played a vital role in shaping his career path; and he encourages students to establish relationships with their professors as well. As a student, Dorf fully intended to become a lawyer, but his teachers at Harvard Law School helped him realize that becoming a professor was a more suitable position for him.

Students should actively seek out mentors, Dorf said, because it is easy to go through law school having minimal contact with teachers. ”My experience is even at schools where faculty have a reputation for being inaccessible, faculty are always very happy to work with students who are highly motivated. It’s just [that] the student may have to go knock on a few doors.”

Dorf began teaching immediately after serving as a law clerk to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy and the Hon. Stephen Reinhardt of U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

Dorf—who teaches courses in civil procedure, constitutional law, and federal courts—said he enjoys his work because he is constantly learning from his students. He said that because they are at an earlier stage in their careers, students have different experiences and viewpoints to share. ”Students always have their own perspective that is not mine. So, it’s a constant source of ideas for me.”

Surprisingly, teaching gets more difficult for Dorf as time goes on because he is further away from being a student himself. ”I find it’s harder and harder to see the material the way someone coming to it for the first time would see it,” he said. Therefore, Dorf tries to remind himself what it was like to be a student by taking classes in other subjects.

He most recently took an acting class, but he found that his mind wandered and he had a difficult time absorbing what his teacher was saying. ”And so as a result, the insight I took away from that was you have to repeat things, you have to pause, you have to do a lot of things to make sure people are coming along with you,” he said.

Even professors with as much experience as Dorf encounter troubling legal and political issues. But he does not shy away from difficult questions, because they often spark important dialogue. ”My view is that the most interesting ideas grow out of confusions,” he said.

Dorf’s biweekly column for Findlaw.com focuses on current controversial legal and political issues. ”The columns themselves have grown out of my own frustration with public debate about the law,” he said. He argues that the conventional criticisms of legal reasoning from conservatives and liberals are wrong. According to Dorf, ”Law is a methodology; and so that even where cases have no clear right or wrong answers, we can discern better and worse answers and good and bad forms of legal reasoning.”

Dorf’s new book, *No Litmus Test: Law versus Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, is a compilation of his columns written over the past five years. ”My main method in this book is to go through lots of very public controversies over roughly the last half decade.” A constant theme is the dividing line between law and politics in the U.S. court system.

Currently, Dorf is working in collaboration with several colleagues on a book tentatively titled *Learning Government*. The central idea of the book is ”democratic experimentalism,” he said. The authors are looking at ways the government can work more effectively and democratically. In order for laws to be realistic and pertinent, the government should develop laws based on people’s actions rather than deciding what one ought to do in the abstract, he said.

In addition to teaching, Dorf continues to practice law pro bono and does paid consulting work. ”I’m primarily a scholar and a teacher, but working on actual concrete cases is, I think, extremely important because it keeps me in touch with the legal profession and how problems are perceived by practicing lawyers and also with the lives of young lawyers,” he said.

He has authored three books and dozens of law articles that have appeared in leading journals. He is also a regular contributor to *The American Prospect*.

**ON THE NET**

*No Litmus Test: Law versus Politics in the Twenty-First Century*  
www.amazon.com/No-Litmus-Test-Politics-Twenty-First/dp/074255029X

*The American Prospect*  
www.prospect.org/web/index.ww

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