When I joined the faculty in 1985, Norman Dorsen had already been a professor at the Law School for 24 years. He took me out to lunch during my first month on the faculty, and from that first conversation on, it was clear to me that the courageous actions that Norman and a few of his contemporaries on the faculty had set in motion in the early 1960s were critical foundations of the Law School’s success.

In 1991, Norman wrote a lengthy article for the NYU Law School Magazine entitled “How NYU Became a Major Law School.” It should be required reading for any student of institutional transformation and is a great reminder of the power of an individual’s leadership. Norman was an extraordinary leader. To illustrate that point, I will quote liberally from Norman’s article.

From the moment of his arrival on the faculty, Norman led a group of young faculty members who had a vision for making the school a leading academic institution. In Norman’s words: “Looking back, it is evident that the younger faculty members different considerably in personal history, temperament, and philosophy. Yet we were largely united and rather aggressive about the vigor and intellectual quality that the Law School could achieve.” And they were willing to take considerable professional risks to bring about this change: “Eventually, after a long and painful struggle, the President of the University heeded insistent faculty entreaties and decided that a change was required and Miguel de Capriles ... announced his resignation.”

Reflecting on the Law School, Norman said: “For me there have been three ideas ... that have epitomized a place that I can be proud of: quality, variety, and heart.” On quality: “[W]hether it is the faculty or student body or administration, whether in teaching or scholarship, whether in one program or another, we must aim high and prize intelligence, imagination, and wit.” On variety: “In the individual background and philosophy of faculty members and students, in the areas of scholarly interest, in analytical and intellectual styles, ... it is essential to encourage differences, even to revel in them.” On heart: “[I]t relates to a moral conception of the law, an approach that takes into account the human consequences of rules and structures.”

As justifiably proud as Norman was about his accomplishments, he was a realist about the permanence of these gains: “[W]e must recognize that the Law School’s immense gains are reversible. To prevent this we must be alert to ensure perpetuation of high quality and the other elements that distinguish the school.”

Over the years, Norman and I saw eye to eye on a number of significant institutional issues but disagreed on a few others. That faculty members who shared a great ambition for the Law School could have such disagreements is a tribute to the transformational work that Norman set in motion. Norman’s great legacy is that faculty members can now debate different views without having to fear that the gains for which Norman had fought so hard would be eroded.
That’s a great legacy, and what’s remarkable is that it is only one of the many great legacies that Norman leaves.