

How Speaker Mike Johnson's plans for a Christian law school unraveled

Johnson vouched for the school -- and agreed to serve as its dean -- without seeing a key feasibility study, he would ultimately admit

**By Michael Kranish and Isaac Stanley-Becker
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In February 2012, Mike Johnson sent an aide on an urgent mission at the college where he had been working to open a law school: Locate a study that he believed would prove the project was financially possible.

For more than a year, Johnson — the dean of the not-yet-opened law school — had been telling donors and the public that the institution, which would focus on training Christian attorneys in northwest Louisiana, was not only achievable, but inevitable.

“From a pure feasibility standpoint,” Johnson, then 38, told the local Town Talk newspaper in 2010 after becoming dean, “I’m not sure how this can fail because ... it looks like the perfect storm for our law school.”

But he had still not actually seen a feasibility study commissioned by the parent school, Louisiana College, a private Southern Baptist college in Pineville, La., now known as Louisiana Christian University.

The aide soon returned with disturbing news: The study had been buried in a filing cabinet. And it was all but useless.

Six months later, in August 2012, Johnson resigned as dean of the new school, which never opened even though the college spent \$5 million to buy and renovate a Shreveport headquarters, among other expenses detailed in local media accounts.

The feasibility study was a “hodgepodge collection of papers,” with “nothing in existence” related to the need for the new law school, market studies, or “funding sources and prospects,” Johnson wrote the following year, describing the episode in what he called a “confidential memorandum” responding to questions from the Louisiana College Board of Trustees

Johnson's April 2013 memo, which was obtained by The Washington Post, reveals how he navigated a previous executive management experience as he takes over a much larger organization, the U.S. House of Representatives, and becomes second in line to the presidency. The memo suggests that Johnson encouraged and agreed to lead what he later described as a sparsely researched effort that collapsed soon after he left. The new speaker's congressional biography makes no mention of his tenure as dean of the never-opened law school. Before winning election to the Louisiana legislature in 2015, and Congress a year later, Johnson mainly worked as a litigator for conservative causes, once remarking that his profession was "legal ministry." He has also taught college courses, according to his House financial disclosures.

A spokesman for Johnson did not respond to a request for comment about the failed law school. Several others involved in the effort said Johnson had worked hard to make the project a reality and was not to blame for its failure.

The 2013 memo suggests, however, that when given a leadership opportunity, Johnson oversold his project's prospects and failed to divulge key problems until after he left the job. In the memo, he blamed others for the problems, writing that the project collapsed because of larger issues at Louisiana College. He also faulted administrators for failing to send him the feasibility study, and said that a crisis involving the college's accreditation agency undercut his effort to have the law school win operational approval.

"The ordeal created a real hardship for me and my family," Johnson wrote, saying that he resigned "with great sadness and only as a last resort."

Joe Aguillard, the president of Louisiana College, later offered an alternative explanation of events — pinning the blame for the law school's failure on Johnson, according to a memo written at the time by another board member, Heath Veuleman. Aguillard said that Johnson's resignation was a selfish decision to pursue a "dream job," according to the memo, which was obtained by The Post. Aguillard also blamed Johnson's resignation "for the Law School's present delays in opening its doors." After leaving the school, Johnson said in a memo that he had accepted a job at a conservative legal institute in the Dallas area.

Veuleman wrote that Johnson had denied these allegations and said in an interview with The Post that the college's financial and management turmoil made Johnson conclude that he "couldn't be dean. He was constantly being usurped. ... I remember phone calls in which Mike would say, 'I can't keep doing this.'"

Aguillard said in a brief phone conversation that he was hospitalized and could not give an interview. His wife, Judy Aguillard, later texted that "my husband loves Mike and mentored him. They are very close."

Johnson had raised hopes in Shreveport that his project could be transformative for Louisiana's third biggest city by bringing in its first law school. Today, civic leaders say that whoever was responsible for the failed effort, it was a significant missed opportunity.

Funding and opening a law school, said a former Shreveport mayor, Democrat Cedric Glover, "is a heavy lift even in the best of circumstances, so success was never a guarantee."

Jay Adkins, a trustee of the parent school at the time, said in an interview that he was among those shocked at how the plans for the law school had collapsed. For several years, Adkins said, he had been led to believe everything was going perfectly.

"Mike did everything he needed to do to move forward, but Louisiana College got in its own way," Adkins said. "There were a number of us on the board of trustees who felt duped, we felt misled, we did not receive information we asked for. I can't say anything to defend Mike in that arena.

All I can say is, I felt very similar to how he felt."

'One heck of a presentation'

Johnson had raised hopes in his hometown of Shreveport, La., that he could bring the city its first law school.

Johnson, a Shreveport native, after law school joined a prominent local firm and then became an attorney for the Alliance Defense Fund, a Christian nonprofit that grew up as an answer to the American Civil Liberties Union and is now known as Alliance Defending Freedom.

In that role, he staked out positions that went further to the right than the views of Republican Party leaders, saying gay relationships were “inherently unnatural” and that same-sex marriage threatened democracy. He sought to take a failed quest to allow religious prayer at public meetings in North Carolina all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. He left the group in 2010, according to a spokeswoman.

Soon, he was boosting plans for a law school in Shreveport. He was hired about September 2010 to be the school’s founding dean and joined Aguillard at a ceremony announcing the project.

The school’s concept was to create an army of Christian legal warriors, as laid out by Aguillard, who said at the announcement that the law school would have “a singular focus on Jesus Christ ... We will affirm Jesus Christ in every lecture, in every classroom, in every office on every square inch of campus.”

That vision was in line with the traditions of the parent college, which was founded in the early 1900s by a Baptist clergyman. The college had long aspired to open a law school, but those efforts advanced considerably under Aguillard, who became president in 2005.

The law school was to be named for Paul Pressler III, a retired Texas judge and leader of the Southern Baptist Convention who, after the school’s collapse, was accused in a lawsuit and court affidavits of sexual misconduct or assault by multiple men, including some who said they were underage at the time of the alleged activity. Tim Johnson, who was executive vice president of Louisiana College at the time of the law school’s launch, said there was pushback about making Pressler the namesake due to his “ultraconservative” biblical views, but that the assault allegations were unknown at the time.

Pressler’s lawyer, Ted Tredennick, said the 93-year-old was unable to respond directly due to dementia but rejected the assault allegations on his behalf. “He denied those allegations categorically when they were first made 20 years ago; he has continuously and consistently denied them since; he would deny them today if he were able.” A trial in the lawsuit has been delayed but is expected early next year.

Beginning a new law school is a monumental task, requiring the recruitment of faculty, raising funds, creating a curriculum and winning accreditation from the American Bar Association.

The school was to open in 2012 in a Shreveport office building that required extensive renovation, including asbestos removal, a cost borne by Louisiana College. The plan was then to raise at least \$20 million and as much as \$50 million to support the law school, according to news accounts at the time.

Gabriel Little, who was in charge of the capital campaign, said Johnson led an impressive effort to recruit faculty, create a curriculum, and present a proposal to win certification from the American Bar Association.

“He put together one heck of a presentation for accreditation” by the ABA, Little said.

But as Johnson prepared to do that, he later wrote in his memorandum to trustees, he learned that Louisiana College had run into a roadblock in its own effort to bolster its accreditation status from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Johnson wrote that the college’s problem with accreditation meant he could not win ABA approval for the law school.

Around the same time, the college faced other struggles. As it moved in a more conservative theological direction, its leaders seized on doctrinal disputes within the Southern Baptist convention to discredit critics, sparking protests by students and some faculty.

Rondall Reynoso, a previous head of the college’s art department, said a culture of fear pervaded the campus — to the point that he stopped using his work computer because of concern that he was being surveilled.

“It was an inquisition-type atmosphere, almost,” Reynoso said, attributing the unrest to what he called the undue influence of the Southern Baptist Convention.

A spokeswoman for Louisiana Christian University, as the school is now known, said no one currently in leadership was serving at the time of the failed law school. The new administration, which took over in 2015, “has worked to address previous deficiencies,” the spokeswoman said, resulting

in a 2021 review that affirmed the university's accreditation "with zero findings of noncompliance."

Johnson wrote in his memo that the "unrest" on campus was shocking, but others said he should have been well aware of the turmoil from news reports about threats to the college's accreditation.

"By the time Johnson gets involved, the problems are well-known, but they're dismissed by hardcore conservatives as a liberal attack," Reynoso said.

At the same time, concern grew at the college about millions of dollars of deferred maintenance at the Pineville campus, raising questions about plans to spend money to start the law school and other projects.

Johnson wrote in his confidential memorandum that Louisiana College's conflicts undercut his plans and he had "no choice" but to delay the ABA filing. In addition, he needed to provide information from the law school feasibility study to win over the ABA.

The problem was that he had never seen the study, notwithstanding his bold statement more than a year earlier that the school's feasibility was beyond question.

Johnson wrote that he had long heard about the feasibility study, saying that the college as far back as 2007 had "heavily relied upon" it as part of its decision to open the law school. Indeed, Johnson wrote that the study would be the "most important" part of the accreditation process because both SACS and the ABA were "increasingly reluctant to approve new law schools." Johnson did not say who wrote the study.

Johnson had to prove the school made financial sense and would have long-term support. He wrote in his memo that he repeatedly asked for the study, but it was never sent to him.

'Minimize publicity'

Two years after Johnson walked away from a project to open a law school in Shreveport, he was elected to Louisiana state legislature. A year after that, he was elected to the U.S. House. This year, he became speaker.

By February 2012, Johnson said he could wait no longer. He wrote that an aide finally found the study in the bottom two drawers of a filing cabinet at the alumni center.

Johnson had spent the prior year insisting that there was a great need for the law school, that millions of dollars would pour in, and that there were more than enough students to fill it. But in the memo, he said it was “shocking” to read the feasibility study and realize that it undercut his rationale for opening the school, adding in a footnote that he was “deeply disturbed” that most trustees had never seen it.

Information from a solidly researched feasibility study was needed as part of the presentation to the accreditation officials, and now, Johnson wrote in the memo, “Suddenly, we realized we had to create all of this *from scratch*.” Adkins said trustees also felt the college leaders did not respond to their inquiries.

“I felt that we asked questions and they were either obfuscated or ignored. There was material we asked for and couldn’t get,” the former trustee said. Tim Johnson, the former Louisiana College executive vice president, who has no relation to the new House speaker, said in an interview that there were plenty of skeptics about the need for a new law school, but he said he and others were convinced that a Christian-based institution could thrive. However, he said that when the law school struggled to raise funds, along with the accreditation issues, “Mike probably saw that it was going to be a long time to do it, if it ever got done, and he was a bright young man and just chose to pursue another path.”

On Aug. 15, 2012, Mike Johnson wrote Aguillard a letter of resignation. He said that developments “beyond our control” had affected his ability to run the school, citing the college’s accreditation problems that had made it difficult to raise funds and recruit students and faculty.

“Our hands are currently tied,” Johnson wrote, adding that he needed to look out for his family.

Privately, Johnson worked with the college on a public relations strategy to cast the resignation in the best possible light, according to internal documents reviewed by The Post.

The talking points included, “Minimize publicity on Mike’s resignation and keep all necessary messaging brief, positive and consistent,” and “Do not concede law school, but maintain it as a temporarily delayed and scaled-down future project.”

That didn’t happen. The law school never opened. Johnson, meanwhile, was elected as a state representative and then in 2016 to the U.S. House, followed by his elevation last month to the speakership.