

Fostering Engagement

Bill Rich to retire after 43 years.

By Angela Lutz

During his 43 years as a professor at Washburn University School of Law, Bill Rich has seen a lot of changes in legal education. Class sizes at the law school have gotten smaller, resulting in better opportunities for interactions with students. Long-time faculty members have become well versed in the art of teaching. And perhaps the biggest change of all: Technology has taken on a prominent role in interactions between students and teachers.

Rich has also seen what makes Washburn special – the rapport between faculty and students, what he calls a “strong, positive collegial relationship.” When Rich retires from Washburn this spring, it is this connection he feels is most vital for future students of the law school.

“I don’t know of any other school where there is such a constructive relationship within the faculty,” Rich said. “That is one thing that is noteworthy at Washburn and that I think we have to work to maintain as the years go on. It’s awfully tempting to sit in an office and just interact with a computer. Retaining the feeling of being part of a collegial environment is something I hope will continue.”

During his tenure as professor, Rich has primarily taught constitutional law, constitutional litigation, civil liberties, and jurisprudence courses. He has also served as the James R. Ahrens chair in torts and constitutional law, as well as associate dean of the law school for five years, acting dean in 1985, and interim dean in 2006. His scholarship has included a three-volume treatise on modern constitutional law, and he plans to continue annual updates to that publication after he retires.

Rich originally came to Washburn to work with low-income individuals through the Washburn Law Clinic, but he quickly discovered he enjoyed the classroom even more than one-on-one interactions in the clinical context.

“The very best occurs when students really become engaged, both with the material and with the learning process,” Rich said. “That can take place both in class and outside of the classroom. It’s extremely rewarding when students become excited about what they’re doing, and engagement outside of the classroom often makes the students feel as if they have accomplished something significant.”

During his four decades at Washburn, Rich has fostered engagement by working with Washburn Law Clinic students representing inmates in constitutional challenges to Kansas prison conditions, a case that went on for 19 years and resulted in a number of major changes within the Kansas Department of Corrections. Rich has also facilitated collaborations between Washburn students and a constitutional law clinic in Tbilisi, Georgia, which has provided opportunities for real-world experience and feedback. Though certain aspects of legal education have changed, Rich’s dedication to his students has remained constant.

“The faculty here have always been devoted to teaching,” Rich said. “They see that as a primary part of their responsibility. It is that shared feeling among the faculty that in turn is so nice. Maintaining that will take work, both in terms of how we go about using technology and making sure we continue doing things here at the law school that result in students staying engaged with us as a faculty.”



Bill Rich. Photo submitted