



Photo by Doug Stremel

Legendary Faculty

Concannon reflects on almost 50 years of service to Washburn Law.

By Sarah Towle, BA '07 | stowle@wualumni.org

Washburn University School of Law has the voters of Kansas to thank that James Concannon became the longest-serving faculty member in the history of the law school.

Concannon worked in the Kansas Attorney General's office as a third-year law student during the summer and fall of 1970 and was planning to continue his service after graduation from the University of Kansas School of Law when Dick Seaton was elected attorney general.

Kansas voters had a different idea though, and Vern Miller was elected, creating quite a bit of turnover in the office.

Concannon went on to serve as a research attorney for Kansas Supreme Court Justice Alex Fromme.

While still working for Fromme, he taught as an adjunct professor at Washburn Law in the summer of 1972 – teaching Conflict of Laws, a class of more than 80 students, at 7:30 in the morning, then going to his office at 9 a.m. His plan was that when former Assistant Attorney General Ed Collister was elected as Douglas County attorney, Concannon would be an assistant county attorney and join Collister's private practice in Lawrence.

Douglas County voters once again had a different idea, so Concannon started to think about what he really wanted to do.

"I enjoyed teaching," said Concannon, who now serves as the Senator Robert J. Dole Distinguished Professor of Law. "I was

fortunate that at about the time Douglas County voters had their say, Washburn Professor Dennis Stewart was appointed as a United States magistrate judge in Missouri, and that opened a full-time position for a faculty member to start in the fall of 1973. Happily, I was selected as the new professor.”

It was Concannon’s relationships with people, and his legendary stories, that have carried him through the decades and made him an iconic figure of Washburn Law for almost 50 years.

Time As Dean, 1988-2001

Concannon always has been focused on being active in the bar, whether it is presenting continuing education programs or serving on bar committees. So, when the University was having difficulty filling the dean position in 1988, David Pierce, ’77, a former student of Concannon and longtime colleague, said Concannon was drafted to the position because people knew he would do so well, and they were right.

There were many noted accomplishments during his time as dean, but a few stand out as essential to getting the law school where it is today - investments in the WashLaw website, the new School of Law Library addition to the building, and increased involvement of faculty in legal education nationally that helped elevate Washburn Law’s status.

“I realized early on we needed to do better communicating with our alumni and getting them involved in supporting the school,” he said. “The most enjoyable part of being dean was having an excuse to go out to see my former students and to learn about the successes they have had in their careers.”

According to his book, “The Ideal Place...for the Establishment of a Great Law School,” Concannon visited alumni in 14 states and more than 40 cities in his first year as dean with the purpose of soliciting donations for the library addition which opened in the spring of 1992.

Before the library addition opened, a new financing plan for the law school was facilitated by Concannon and many other administrators at Washburn University, and the school was given greater autonomy to increase its tuition and budget. Concannon said he knew students were willing to pay for a quality legal education, and that Washburn Law should not diminish its quality because it wasn’t able to increase its budget.

“The law school financing plan was something that worked well when enrollment was expanding everywhere and people wanted to go to law school,” he said. “It gave us the financial resources to recruit top-notch faculty members

and invest in technology. It gave us the flexibility to create a stronger program.”

The law school also was recognized by top legal publications while Concannon was dean. Among many other recognitions, in 1994, the National Jurist ranked Washburn Law first in the nation with student satisfaction with the quality of faculty and in 1996 ranked the school second in overall student satisfaction.

Changes In Teaching

When he came back to full-time teaching after serving as dean, he often quipped he was returning to what he was trained to do. Despite earning many honors for his service to the legal profession - he was honored with the Kansas Supreme Court Justice Award in 2012, the Distinguished Service Award from the Kansas Bar Association in 2017, and the Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Kansas School of Law in 2011 – Concannon said he believes his biggest accomplishment over the course of almost a half century has been helping to hire excellent faculty members to continue the traditions of an exemplary education at Washburn.

Many other faculty who had long tenures or are still serving started around the same time Concannon did.

“Given I’m the most senior faculty member, the thing I feel good about is that I have been involved in the hiring process for everyone else who is here,” he said. “I think we have assembled an outstanding group of faculty members who are really committed



Photo by Earl Richardson



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to students, and I hope the culture that we created will be carried on.”

With the changes in technology, how students learn has changed over time. When a case is mentioned in class, students can immediately pull it up online and a more in-depth discussion can take place. But technology also has had its downsides because of the instant gratification when students believe they have read something in their favor. Having taught many classes on statutes, Concannon has been known for saying “When a rule or a statute is involved, don’t think great thoughts. Read the rule.” Today, his corollary to that is: “When a rule or a statute is involved, it is mandatory to read all the way to the period.”

It is Concannon’s personality that won him over in the classroom among students.

“He was always very animated and had a twist or a turn to every story to go along with what we were studying for the day,” said Pierce, recalling him as a professor. “With his wonderful sense of humor he approached each class totally at ease and was obviously having fun teaching us. We were having fun learning. Even with the anxiety of preparing for class and being called upon to recite, we still looked forward to our time with ‘Concannon.’ It was a badge of honor to have been taught – and tested – by him.”

The care faculty have for students has not changed over the last few decades, and Concannon hopes that culture continues, noting students are very savvy and want to learn.

“Every day is different,” he said. “Students will come up with things that no student previously saw. The material and my subjects are interesting to me, and as a faculty member, you hope you’re helping people to learn how to analyze situations and come up with practical solutions.”

Concannon said that after almost 50 years, he enjoys the collegial atmosphere among the faculty and students. Despite not attending as many student parties anymore, they still have fun together.

“When a lot of the senior faculty first started teaching here, most of us weren’t much older than our students. Most students from the 70s and 80s will remember that I rarely missed a student party,” he joked. “I miss more now because students frequently don’t start them until 9 o’clock at night.”

The Future Of Washburn Law

After this spring, Concannon will transition into a new role in which he still will teach Evidence and Civil Procedure II in the spring and also work to expand placement opportunities for students. While he will leave to others teaching the online courses affiliated with the new Third Year Anywhere™ program at Washburn Law, he is excited for how legal education and the law school will change. He believes the program will help the law school compete for applicants in a broader geographical range and make graduates more competitive for job opportunities where they want to practice.

“We have a lot to do to develop an online-course capacity, and I can assure you that I’m not going to lead us in doing that,” he joked. “But recruiting students has always been a challenge for every law school, and with the decline in enrollment in law schools nationally, we have to offer opportunities that meet the needs of students, or they will not come.”

Understanding what the library expansion did for the current law building that is 50 years old, Concannon is looking forward to the new building, and what it will do for Washburn Law. To properly implement the online course structure, new technology and different configurations will be needed in the classrooms, and the new building will make that possible.

No matter what the future holds, one thing won’t change about the law school – it will always be a place that trains good and ethical lawyers and provides students opportunities, and the law faculty will always make significant contributions to the profession and scholarship. Pierce believes those traditions will hold true because of people like Concannon.

“I’ve seen him as a student and a colleague,” Pierce said. “He brought so much to the University and the law school during his service as dean. He served during important times for the law school. He identified what needed to be done, and did it.”



James Concannon wrote the book, “The Ideal Place...for the Establishment of a Great Law School: History of Washburn Law School 1903-2003,” and published it in 2012.

Celebrating a Century

While serving as dean, James Concannon researched and wrote an article describing the history of little-known law schools in Kansas in the late 1800s and early 1900s including Campbell College in Holton, Bethany College in Lindsborg, and Garfield University on the campus of what today is Friends University in Wichita.

When his time as dean of the law school concluded in 2001, and with Washburn Law’s centennial approaching in 2003, Concannon knew Washburn Law had a special story, and it needed to be told.

“In the course of being dean, I talked with so many people and heard so many stories,” he said. “There were some myths that had gone around, and writing the book was one thing I decided needed to be done. Given the preliminary work I had done about the other Kansas law schools, I concluded that if I did not do this, no one would.”

Concannon, with the editing assistance of many faculty members, alumni, and others, wrote the book “The Ideal Place...for the Establishment of a Great Law School: History of Washburn Law School, 1903-2003,” and it was published in 2012. The 756-page book, with an extensive index, is still available for purchase today and is often given to new faculty members to give them a sense of the role the law school has played in the legal community and to continue the transfer of the culture of Washburn Law.

“Washburn Law survived a good deal of adversity through the early years, but so many of the alumni I visited with during my years as dean had such pride in the institution and felt so fondly about the faculty members they had, it seemed to me this would be a book our alumni would enjoy,” Concannon said.