The laws that govern our lives day by day derive from many sources. Many have their roots in common law, but the U.S. Constitution, state constitutions, federal and state statutes, and other influences also have played decisive roles. This patchwork process inevitably produces inconsistencies and contradictions.

The American Law Institute (ALI) was established in 1923 to create some order in this confusion, to “clarify, modernize, and otherwise improve the law.” Today it is one of the most respected voices in American law and jurisprudence.

The ALI’s 4,000 lawyers, judges, and law professors draft, discuss, revise, and publish restatements of the law, model statutes, and principles of law. According to Vice Dean Susan Appleton, the Lemma Barkeloo and Phoebe Couzins Professor of Law, a member of the ALI Council or governing body, and until spring 2013 Secretary of the ALI, these publications shape American law in several key ways.

“In reaching decisions, courts often rely on a restatement or other ALI project,” Appleton notes. “So, for example, the Supreme Court in the last week of its most recently completed term cited ALI restatements in four different cases. Legislatures also can find such work influential, as with the Model Penal Code, which many state legislatures used in reforming their criminal statutes.”

Beyond these impacts, ALI publications can address rules and regulations used by governmental agencies. Appleton’s own scholarly interests focus on family law, and she was an Adviser for Principles of the Law of Family Dissolution, published in 2002. “On some issues,” she explains, “neither a legislature nor a court is really in charge, but instead an administrative agency that develops child support guidelines, for example.”

Other law faculty members and ALI members have actively participated, as well. Pauline Kim, the Charles Nagel Professor of Law, has worked as an Adviser on an employment law project. Michael Greenfield, the George Alexander Madill Professor of Contracts & Commercial Law, is contributing as an Adviser to a project on consumer contracts. Professor Kathleen Clark is currently Associate Reporter on the Principles of Government Ethics, and Professor Laura Rosenbury has facilitated a discussion exploring a possible ALI project on children and law. Although not currently an institute member, Professor Neil Richards is working as an Adviser on an ALI privacy project.

Appleton believes one of the ALI’s great strengths lies in the membership’s breadth. “The institute is composed of legal academics, practicing lawyers, and judges,” she notes. “Rarely do all three segments of the profession come together to examine the law as it is and as it might be. They all bring different perspectives about the varied topics that ALI tackles.”

Some 14 Washington University Law faculty are members of the ALI: Professors Susan Appleton, Kathleen Clark, Michael Greenfield, Rebecca Hollander-Blumoff, Daniel Keating, Pauline Kim, Stephen Legomsky, Ronald Levin, Charles McManis, Kimberly Norwood, Laura Rosenbury, Leila Nadya Sadat, Hillary Sale, and Dean Kent Syverud. Additionally, the ALI recently recognized a prominent law alumnus, William Webster, JD ’49, with the coveted Henry J. Friendly Medal.