Why I Teach

The energy of a university is hard to top for a place to work—and I couldn’t conceive of a better place to teach than Washington University.

Nearly a decade before I came to Washington University, I first thought about teaching when I was a law student because I was impressed by so many of my professors. I realized that a good teacher could help a student develop an interest in a particular field of the law, just as a bad teacher could drive a student away. Stanford Law School had an excellent teaching faculty when I was a student there in the early 1970s. Many of my professors have had a lasting influence on me to this day. Jack Friedenthal, for example, brought his sense of humor to teaching Civil Procedure. I try to do that, too, because learning rules can be a little dry at times. I still use his casebook today with some of the funny and unusual cases he put in the book to make the material more interesting. The most influential, and the best teacher of all, was Charlie Meyers, my first-year Property professor. Coincidentally, Charlie was a product of the excellent teaching tradition at the University of Texas Law School, as was our own Mike Greenfield.

I have noticed that many good law teachers point to their professors who influenced their teaching and that certain law schools were particularly influential during different eras. Washington University has long been known for the quality of its teaching. When I joined the faculty here in 1979, Frank Miller and others of his generation impressed upon me the importance of being a “triple threat” faculty member: excelling at teaching, scholarship, and service to the law school and the University. They not only spoke often about the need for excellence in teaching, they also showed by example. Then David Becker and Mike Greenfield followed, and in many ways improved upon, that tradition. I’ve tried to follow their example over the years.

Our law students have kept me young at heart. They bring an energy that makes the classroom (and the entire building) alive and exciting. Even though I have been a professor for more than 30 years, every new class brings students who raise novel points and add a fresh perspective to the material I have been covering.

“Why I Teach” is a regular column in the Washington University Law Magazine highlighting various faculty members’ unique and heartfelt reflections on what makes teaching law rewarding. Previous columns have been written by Dean Kent Syverud and Professors David Becker, Michael Greenfield, and Susan Appleton. To view these columns, visit: law.wustl.edu/WhyITeach.
“Every new class brings students who raise novel points and add a fresh perspective to the material I have been covering year after year.”

Doug North (a member of the Economics faculty who would receive the Nobel Prize in 1993) in teaching a law and economics course for both undergraduates and law students. That has always been a special collaboration as a result of the give-and-take Doug and I have in class and the radically divergent perspectives economics and law students bring to the course material.

My interest in economics also led me to become interested in antitrust law. As many of the industries I taught about in Regulated Industries became deregulated and the course itself headed toward obsolescence, I was able to replace that course with Antitrust. A few years ago, I began teaching Federal Jurisdiction as a complement to my Civil Procedure course. During all the years I taught Civil Procedure, I had the sense that I needed to know more about the related federal material. Teaching a law school course is truly a great way to learn the material, so my teaching of Federal Jurisdiction has helped my teaching of Civil Procedure, and vice versa.

Finally, I am teaching first-year Property beginning this fall. Although I practiced property law when I was a lawyer and I taught Real Estate Transactions during my first years at Washington University, this course will be a new challenge because I’ve never taught in the first semester of law school, where building a good foundation in case analysis is crucial. Although teaching a new course means more work, it also reenergizes me and keeps my job interesting. In this way, my job is always different, even though in many ways it is the same.

I enjoyed my five years of law practice, but I like law teaching even more. I not only try to motivate my students to work hard at learning the law, but I also try to help them enjoy learning. I also strive to help instill a sense of ethical standards and social obligations in all of us “officers of the court.” Most of all, I try to help my students learn to love the law. Too many people, even lawyers who routinely get involved in the daily details of law practice, forget that the law is essential to social stability and to our way of life. I tell my students that they are lucky because they will be joining one of the most important professions in our society. I’ve seen all kinds of comments in the student evaluations of my courses during these 30 years, but last fall I received a comment in Federal Jurisdiction that accurately portrayed my beliefs and complemented me in a unique way. The student wrote that it was “great to have a professor who genuinely loves the Constitution and the practice of law.” That’s how I feel—and I’m glad my students know that.

John N. Drobak is the George Alexander Madill Professor of Real Property & Equity Jurisprudence at the law school and a professor of economics and of political economy in Arts & Sciences.

By John N. Drobak