White Retires After 48 Years

Professor J.J. White, the Robert A. Sullivan Professor of Law, retired at the end of the fall term after 48 years of teaching at the Law School. White, ’62, built a reputation not just as an expert in the field of commercial law, but also as a tough, fair, and often very funny professor.

Online professor guides from former students describe him as “entertaining, curmudgeonly,” and “one of the best professors I’ve had at the Law School.” “He puts you through the wringer each time he calls on you in class,” wrote one alum, but he also “truly cares about you as a student and person,” wrote another.

White’s book Uniform Commercial Code (with Summers and Hillman) is the most widely recognized treatise on the subject. The scholarship, named after a founder of the current Kirkland & Ellis and given by Colonel McCormick of the Chicago Tribune to honor his lawyer, was available to anyone who was a resident of "Chicagoland" and went to school there. Mr. McCormick had an expansive view of Chicagoland; it went from the Missouri River to Lake Huron, so as a resident of Iowa who was going to school at Michigan, I qualified.

How did you get to the Michigan Law School?
My grandfather graduated from Michigan in 1908 and I was attracted by its reputation. It helped that I had a Weymouth Kirkland scholarship that paid all of my tuition and a stipend for living expenses. The scholarship, named after a founder of the current Kirkland & Ellis and given by Colonel McCormick of the Chicago Tribune to honor his lawyer, was available to anyone who was a resident of "Chicagoland" and went to school there. Mr. McCormick had an expansive view of Chicagoland; it went from the Missouri River to Lake Huron, so as a resident of Iowa who was going to school at Michigan, I qualified.

What changes have you seen in the Law School in 48 years?
You miss many of the big changes because they occur incrementally. So how are things different? The number of students has grown larger, mostly through the addition of writing instructors and clinical teachers.

My teaching style has changed a little bit. I've always been more or less a Socratic teacher. One change in my teaching in my upper-class courses, about maybe 10 years after I had come here, I got hold of a class that was unprepared all the time. I decided to institute a series of quizzes, and I do three of them in the semester. That changes the behavior of the students substantially. They realize they can’t wait until the end of the semester to learn everything, and their performance in class is a lot better.

I always throw away my notes after each class, and that has been a problem because as you get older, you forget things more easily. But it has helped me to stay fresh and come at the material a little differently each year.

One big change in the students between the time I was in school here and now is, there aren’t any dumb students here anymore. I was in school just after the time when the drill was to admit anyone and then flunk out one third of the class after the first year. Then a handful of students had a hard time getting through school. All of our students now are easily smart enough to do good work in any course. The people at the top are smarter than they were then.

What are the virtues of the Socratic method?
My hope with calling on students during class has always been that the practice will encourage careful preparation and that it will prepare them for probing questions from judges, colleagues, and even clients. Even in a Socratic discourse, you can help a student along by various tricks. What I'll do is call on a student; if they stumble, I’ll say to the person next to them, “Give her a hand, will you?” and later I try to go back to the first student and give them another chance. I believe that it is better for our students to learn how to deal with hard questions here, where there’s no cost, except a bit of embarrassment, to their being wrong.

How do you compare law practice to teaching?
I practiced law for only a couple of years, and I never regretted coming back here to teach. Not one minute. I loved teaching, and I got to like writing. Hanging out in the lounge with my colleagues is also great fun. [Professors] Frier and Miller continue to try to teach me medieval and ancient history, and that’s enjoyable—because of, or perhaps despite, their personalities.

Tell us some of your memorable interactions with students.
We used to have a talent show in the Lawyers Club Lounge every year, and I was in it a number of times, almost always making an ass of myself. One time, I was in a mud wrestling contest. I wore an old suit, and it was completely wiped out. One time, I did a dance with four women students; since I can’t dance, I’m sure that was an embarrassment. That’s enjoyable—because of, or perhaps despite, their personalities.

See a video interview with Professor White at www.law.umich.edu/quadrangle.