



**PROFESSOR ROBERT F. WILLIAMS – TEACHER, MENTOR,
SCHOLAR, & FRIEND**

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INTRODUCTION

I first met Professor Williams when I was a law student at Rutgers-Camden. When I enrolled in his course on State Constitutional Law, I knew next to nothing about state constitutions and very little about public law in general. Professor Williams's course was transformative for me. It exposed me to a new world of institutional arrangements, arguments, problems, and solutions. More importantly, however, it introduced me to Professor Williams: a teacher, mentor and, ultimately, a friend who has impacted my career and life in profound ways.

Professor Williams is surely *the* premier legal scholar of state constitutional law, an intellectual pioneer, and an influencer of inspiring proportions.¹ His prolific research opened an entire field of study, changed law school curricula, sways courts, and continues to drive various institutional reforms. But amidst all this well-deserved and high-profile success, he has also been a dedicated teacher to thousands of students, a tireless advocate and mentor, and a gracious friend to many around the world.

For my part in this Festschrift, I will focus on a few of my own personal experiences with Professor Williams as my teacher and mentor. I offer these anecdotes as a celebration of Professor Williams's generous spirit, and to draw attention to the great breadth of his legacy, which includes not only reshaping a field of law, but the careful and attentive mentoring of his students.

I. TEACHER

I was a law student at Rutgers-Camden from 2003 to 2006. I took Professor Williams's state constitutional law class without much

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1. See G. Alan Tarr, *The Contributions of Robert Williams*, 72 RUTGERS U. L. REV. ___ (2020).

perspective or background on the topic. Looking back, my initial decision to take the class was probably based on foolish considerations such as my own scheduling preferences and rumors about his liberal attendance policy. However, the class had a profound impact on me.

In my 1L course on federal constitutional law, I was exposed to the contestability of constitutional norms. But that conversation necessarily centered around the ideological or methodological preferences of the Supreme Court Justices and the role of the Supreme Court as the final arbiter of constitutional meaning. Those were valuable lessons, but Professor Williams's course on state constitutional law drew my attention to a deeper dynamic in constitutional structure. It opened my eyes to another way of looking at constitutional problems and to a more complete perspective on American public law.

Professor Williams placed constitutional rights, for example, in a dynamic institutional context that accounted for state courts and citizens acting through referendum and initiative. Class discussion was rich with conversations about the ultimate source of constitutional rights, the compatibility of direct democracy with American constitutional theory, structural enforcement of rights, and the counter-majoritarian function of courts. In addressing these issues, Professor Williams was the consummate scholar-teacher. He piqued interest, methodically drew out analytical frameworks, and then, much to our dismay *and* delight, meticulously deconstructed it all. He was always fair and inclusive, rigorous but gracious, scholarly but authentic.

It is no exaggeration to say that Professor Williams's course lit a fire in me. His skill as a teacher, expertise as a scholar, and genuine engagement with students were inspiring to experience as a student. Indeed, it was during this time, and largely due to Professor Williams's course, that I resolved to pursue a career in academia myself. As I look over my old notes from his class, it is striking to me how many of my own research projects have their origins in conversations from his course.

Professor Williams's class on State Constitutional Law at Rutgers was a gem. I am forever grateful that I had the privilege of first learning state constitutional law from him.

II. MENTOR

Professor Williams's impact as a teacher extends well beyond the lectern. What follows is part of my experience under Professor Williams's mentorship, but I know he has influenced many others in similar and even greater ways.

During my final year at Rutgers, Professor Williams agreed to oversee my work on an independent study. This proved to be a turning

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point in my development as a critical thinker, researcher, scholar, and teacher. I first considered the idea of an independent study because of my interest in how constitutionalism operated in other countries. Specifically, I was interested in studying South Africa, where I spent my childhood between 1982 and 1998. Armed with a quiver of new concepts and ideas from law school, I was eager to revisit the political and legal history of the country where I was raised. I discovered that Professor Williams had written about subnational constitutions in South Africa, including an attempt by my home province (Kwa-Zulu Natal) to adopt a provincial constitution.² I read his article and asked if he would be willing to oversee my own research on the topic. He graciously agreed.

Over the course of my 3L year, Professor Williams guided me through the process of literature review, formulating a research plan, articulating and defending a claim, and drafting. At each stage of the process, he challenged and encouraged me. He pushed me to abandon bad ideas. He encouraged me to develop good ideas. His high standards and rigorous questioning took me to dusty archives in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, where I had the thrill of uncovering a few forgotten chapters in the legal history of my home province. Professor Williams also challenged me to “talk to real people” in “the trenches,” which led me to meetings with local politicians and activists who were reviving efforts for a provincial constitution.

The experience of researching under Professor Williams was deeply formative for me. I remember one exchange vividly. My project had evolved to the point where I felt strongly about a particular claim based on the evidence I had gathered: provincial constitutions in South Africa were not about substantive law, they were about political voice. I initially articulated the claim in a way that did not fit within existing frameworks and misused concepts from political science and legal theory, but I was (foolishly) very sure of my work.

In a meeting on my draft, I remember him circling my thesis sentence—the pride and joy of my draft—and saying to me “I don’t know what any of this means.” To be sure, I was defeated in the moment, but that was just the beginning of Professor Williams’s investment in my project. He saw my errors clearly, but he also believed in my underlying idea despite its rawness and lack of sophistication. He encouraged me, gave me new readings, connected me directly with scholars in the field, and reviewed many more drafts and redrafts. He never did my work for me, but he never let me stop improving nor left me unaware of my own

2. See Robert F. Williams, *Comparative Subnational Constitutional Law: South Africa’s Provincial Constitutional Experiments*, 40 S. TEX. L. REV. 625, 638–40, 643, 647–48 (1999), reprinted in 63 J. FOR CONTEMP. ROMAN-DUTCH L. 367, 385–86 (2000).

shortcomings.³ He taught me. And I see now that he was also teaching me how to teach.

That independent study under Professor Williams resulted in my first publication.⁴ As I read that article now (more than a decade after its publication), I see even more shortcomings in it. But what is most vivid to me are all the lessons I learned from Professor Williams while working on it. Lessons about research, writing, thinking, and mentorship. One of the best lessons was to engage with people directly as well as with their ideas. I learned a lot about my own thinking by talking with other scholars and the people involved in my subject. Professor Williams taught me that scholarship does not have to be (and perhaps should not be) a solitary exercise. It is best experienced with a community and with sensitivity and respect for those affected by our fields of inquiry.

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I will conclude by saying that Professor Williams is the most generous of friends. More than a decade after completing my studies at Rutgers, he continues to invest in my learning, success, and well-being. He still offers to read my work. He connects me with people and ideas, and, yes, he still tells me when I miss something. He is, in short, the finest of friends. I suspect that Professor Williams's lasting impact on the field of state constitutional law will be surpassed only by the personal impact he has had (and continues to have) on his students and colleagues.

3. Professor Williams is a meticulous editor. In one draft, I had consistently used the phrase "a historical" instead of the grammatically correct phrase "an historical." He corrected all of them in my draft and explained the grammar rule in his comments.

4. See Jonathan L. Marshfield, *Authorizing Subnational Constitutions in Transitional Federal States: South Africa, Democracy, and the KwaZulu-Natal Constitution*, 41 VAND. J. TRANSNAT'L L. 585 (2008).