

## BUILDING THE FUTURE OF LEGAL EDUCATION WITH CARPENTER'S TOOLS

Kellye Y. Testy\*

Thank you, Piper, for the warm introduction. I have very much enjoyed meeting you and all of the students on law review who have helped to bring this conference honoring Professor Catherine Carpenter forward. Thank you all for your work: producing a law review is like running a small business while you are also in law school, so know that we appreciate you. I also thank all the servers who are here today — the people who are helping make this a wonderful event for us. Thank you so much. We are truly grateful. And as I am issuing thanks, I give a huge thanks to Professor Danni Hart and everyone who had a part in inviting me and organizing and executing this timely gathering. I know so many of your faculty here and I also know your wonderful dean, Darby Dickerson. We've had the pleasure of working together in many contexts and she is truly one of the best leaders in legal education nationwide. Yours is a great law school with a vital mission and I am delighted to be with you.

We have a particular professor we are recognizing and celebrating today, Catherine Carpenter. I am so honored to be able to share a few words with you to bring recognition to the outstanding career that she has devoted to legal education. In particular, I was asked to reflect on her career in the context of the future of legal education. Given my new role leading the Association of American Law Schools (AALS), I think about that future day and night! So, I have entitled these remarks *Building the Future of Legal Education with Carpenter's Tools*. Our future in legal education is going to be much better if we use Carpenter's tools.

Before I turn to those tools in detail, let me note that one of the things that I find interesting is that Professor Carpenter and I never had the pleasure of being colleagues at the same school or even overlapping to a significant

---

\* Kellye Y. Testy is the Chief Executive Officer of the Association of American Law Schools. Her prior leadership roles in legal education included serving as the President & CEO of the Law School Admission Council and as a law school dean at two law schools, the University of Washington and Seattle University. She thanks Professor Catherine Carpenter for her exemplary service to legal education and Dean Darby Dickerson and the student editors of the Southwestern Law Review for hosting this symposium to honor Professor Carpenter.

degree on major projects. While there were just a few times that we were actually on the same committee at the same time, she is nonetheless one of the people whom I was always aware of and inspired by. Her influence is a testament to the fact that in education we get to be what those philosopher queens, the Indigo Girls, call “ripples in the water.”<sup>1</sup> As they sing: “We get to be the ripples in the water. We get to be the rocks that are thrown.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, we have the enormous privilege of being able to make a difference in places that we do not even always see and feel.

Professor Carpenter, I want to make sure that you know that that was what you were for me. I was always aware of you. I was always hearing so much about you and taking inspiration from the kind of work you did with these great Carpenter’s tools. So, it is indeed high time I have a chance to say, “thank you,” and I say it now with great respect for your impactful career and a job very, very well done.

As I share a few remarks with you today about the pillars of legal education that I think we are going to have to focus upon — that is, about the way we are going to need to build with these Carpenter’s tools — I start by noting that it is an honor for me to lead the Association of American Law Schools. I love getting to work with so many law schools and supporting them. Our mission is an interesting one. We have a dual mission, being both the learned society for law faculty and also the membership organization for law schools that are committed to our core values centered on teaching and scholarly excellence. That focus of helping law schools be as strong as they can be is one that has animated us for what is now 125 years of excellence. And I want to make clear today, too, as we’re facing a lot of change in our world, that we’ve always seen inclusion as a huge part of excellence. There’s no problem I have ever seen that is not better solved by having diverse viewpoints engaged in the solution. That inclusive approach will continue to guide us to excellence as we face a time of huge pressure and contestation in legal education and the law. This time calls us toward even greater commitment to the collective project of advancing the rule of law and working for equal justice under law.

As we go forward in this environment, there are three tools that I want to highlight that Professor Carpenter has used so well and that I think are going to serve us well in the future as we rise to meet the challenges of our day. I start with calling out the wonderful privilege of creation of thought, of producing scholarship, that those of us who are lucky enough to be in the academy have the time to do. One of the biggest differences between being

---

1. Indigo Girls Lyrics, *Perfect World*, AZLYRICS, <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/indigogirls/perfectworld.html> (last visited Oct. 1, 2025).

2. *Id.*

a professor and a practitioner is as a professor you have some time to think. As a practitioner, you are so busy “doing” that it is hard to pull back and reflect. That privilege of having time to reflect and to put our thoughts out to the world through our scholarship is so important. We desperately need that reflection and deep thought to navigate a complex legal, political and social environment.

When I consider Professor Carpenter’s work, one of the things that impresses me so much about it is its incredible range. She is not a scholar that you could say, “Well, there’s just a couple of practice-based articles,” or “there were a few really theoretical articles,” or “there are a lot of articles, but I don’t know what they said.” No, there is an incredible body of work here that has range and agility that matters deeply. I talked to a lawyer last night who told me that she cites Professor Carpenter a lot in the cases that she’s doing. Her work has real-time impact and long-term staying power. It brings in culture. It brings in language, including the way we talk about people who have been accused of crimes that concern sex. Her work spans everything from language to theory to practice. It blends all that together, and it makes a difference. And that’s what I think we’re going to need to continue to do is to bring that alchemy that makes the most of scholarship and makes that kind of impact.

Further, what I have loved so much about Professor Carpenter’s work is that she sees the world from the bottom up rather than just the top down. She explores how law matters in the world, not just to those of us who are privileged, but to those whom it affects most deeply and upon whom it can have lasting effects and change the very course of their lives and their ability to thrive. We need that perspective in our scholarship. How does law matter in the way it is in the world, and who are the people that it is really impacting? I hope we use that tool, that Carpenter’s tool, to go forward because we need that contribution of the academy to our world, especially now, as so much that matters is changing so rapidly and so fundamentally.

The second thing that I want to suggest we’re going to need going forward has more to do with Professor Carpenter’s teaching, which I have heard so much about today from all of you. She is the rare person who even has good teaching evaluations in online anonymous forums! Truly amazing. What makes her so effective and beloved? Let me start with something I notice, and something I hear repeatedly from students: the way she *sees* you. You all know what I am talking about here. You have seen her look at you. She *sees* you, right? She pays attention. Paying attention in our distracted world is hard, but vital. I am a lover of poetry in part because it slows you down and helps you pay attention. Mary Oliver is a great example of a poet

who can watch a grasshopper all day until she sees a whole theory of the world based on how that grasshopper moves.

Paying attention and really seeing people matters. That is the second of Carpenter's tools the legal academy should lean into going forward. I think of it as embracing a whole-person approach to the education and professional development of students — to understanding that it's not just about the mind, it is also about the well-being of the whole person. This form of education cares about where you come from, meets you where you are, and focuses on making the biggest difference between where you start and how far you can go. Professor Carpenter understands something that I have really valued as a first-generation college graduate — that education is sacred. It changes who you are, how you understand yourself, the way you can even think about your place in the world, your very identity as a human. We need this humanistic approach to legal education. We need everyone's voice, and the more we can lift more people up and have them be seen and help them thrive, the more our legal profession is going to be strong. Bravo to Professor Carpenter for nurturing the whole person through her teaching.

The third Carpenter's tool that is going to be critical to use going forward is one I fear we have let grow weak along the way lately: care for and building institutions. We have not taken care of our institutions in the way we should for our world to be as strong as it needs to be. It has become very fashionable to tear down any institution and to not invest time in building them up. Who needs them? We do. In her career, whether it is her school, the ABA, AALS, or various other nonprofit organizations, alliances, and consortia, Professor Carpenter has put her shoulder to the wheel time and time again to build up and to nurture and to take care of and make stronger institutions. And those serve us well because they serve the common good. And the common good is something that we have to nurture. We can't just be about "me," we have to be about "we."

Professor Carpenter has worked unselfishly to advance the common good. As an example, I was looking at the list of schools she had worked with through the ABA to help them get accreditation or doing site visits or fact-finding missions on challenging issues facing schools. This was not the elite highly resourced list of schools that she was helping; no, she was the ABA's go-to resource for the tough assignments. Over and over her work shows commitment to nurture institutions so they can be there for all of us. At a time when law itself is undergoing so much stress, those institutions are what can help the center hold. I commend her and thank her for that investment that she has made that will benefit all of us and the larger causes of law, justice, and democracy.

In sum, whether it is through impactful scholarship, through whole-person education, or through institution building and the service that we give, those are the Carpenter's tools that are going to help make legal education strong going forward. And any good carpenter will tell you, we don't just "build stuff out of wood." That's not what we do. We are the builders of dreams! Professor Carpenter is and has been a builder of dreams. It is impossible to quantify, even with AI, the contributions that she has made to the achievements of her students, to the development of law and justice, to the flourishing of faculty and staff members, to the strength of our core institutions that connect us across time. Just as she has been, we now get to be those ripples in the water. Let us keep those ripples flowing, reaching ever more widely and growing ever bigger and more persistent.

Thank you, Professor Carpenter, for using the tools in your toolbox so well, for teaching so many of us how to join you in building a future for legal education that truly advances the pathway to a just world. We are in your debt. To show you the Association's appreciation, I come bearing gifts. This is a beautiful book that commemorates the first 125 years of the Association of American Law Schools. I hereby present this to Professor Carpenter with our boundless thanks and deep admiration and respect. May this gift be a token of our gratitude to you for your incredible devotion to legal education. Thank you all so much for your time and attention, and thank you for inviting me. It is really lovely to be with you. Let's enjoy the rest of the conference and continue to learn from one another.