

# WILLIAM A. KAPLIN:

## A Biographical Sketch

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The National Association of College and University Attorneys (NACUA) is pleased to memorialize William A. Kaplin's extraordinary contributions to NACUA and to the field of higher education law for this Special Issue of the *Journal of College and University Law* (JCUL).

Professor Kaplin's deep and extensive engagement with NACUA culminated in his being awarded Life Membership in 2018. This award, one of the highest honors the Association can bestow, was made in recognition of his outstanding service and his sustained and substantial contributions to NACUA and the field of higher education law. He also was selected as a NACUA Fellow in 1990.

Among the many accomplishments for which he was honored are his work as an author—with Barbara Lee, and later Neal Hutchens and Jacob Rooksby—on the text *The Law of Higher Education* (now in its 7th edition) and his work as an editor of and author for JCUL. As one of his NACUA colleagues said, when describing the importance of *The Law of Higher Education*, “There are probably very few higher education attorneys who have not opened his great treatise.”<sup>1</sup> He was also the author of *Constitutional Law: An Overview, Analysis, and Integration* (Carolina Academic Press 2004).

He served as Editor of JCUL from 1976 to 1979 and was a fixture on its editorial board until his retirement in 2013. His articles for JCUL included:

- William A. Kaplin, *Law on Campus 1960-1985: Years of Growth and Challenge* 12 J.C. & U.L. 269 (1985).
- William A. Kaplin, *A Typology and Critique of the Title IX Sexual Harassment Law After Gebser and Davis*, 26 J.C. & U.L. 615 (2000).

In the words of a person who nominated Professor Kaplin for Life Membership in NACUA:

Bill Kaplin essentially invented the field of higher education law (with his esteemed colleague Barbara Lee), and his book is the iconic guiding work in our field of practice. His impact on higher education practice, on us as practitioners, and on generations of law students who used the book in their course on higher education law (and hopefully got interested in higher education legal practice), has been incalculable. Bill has been an extraordinary mentor in this field, and friend to many.<sup>2</sup>

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\* President & CEO, National Association of College and University Attorneys.

1 Margaret O'Donnell, *Life Member Award Nomination*, NAT'L ASS'N COLL. UNIV. ATT'YS (2017) (on file with NACUA).

Another nominator described his contributions to NACUA as follows:

Bill Kaplin has performed important service to NACUA members through his writing and speaking at NACUA conferences. Most significantly, his book, *The Law of Higher Education*, is required reading for all university attorneys.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Kaplin, as he was known to the NACUA community, received his A.B. degree in political science from the University of Rochester and his J.D. degree with distinction from Cornell University, where he was Editor-in-Chief of the *Cornell Law Review*. He then worked with a Washington, D.C., law firm; served as a judicial clerk at the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit; and was an attorney in the education division of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, after which he joined the faculty at The Catholic University of America Columbus School of Law. While on the faculty full-time, Professor Kaplin taught courses in Education Law, Constitutional Law, and Civil Rights, moving through the tenure-stream ranks and ultimately becoming a tenured Full Professor, before transitioning to the role of Research Professor, a title he held from 2007 to 2013.

Professor Kaplin was a visiting professor at Cornell Law School and at Wake Forest University School of Law; a distinguished professorial lecturer at Stetson University College of Law; a distinguished visiting scholar at the Institute for Higher Education Law and Governance, University of Houston; and a visiting scholar at the Institute for Educational Leadership, George Washington University. He was a former member of the Education Appeal Board, U.S. Department of Education; the former editor of JCUL; a member of the U.S./U.K. Higher Education Law Roundtable; a mentor/leader for the biannual Higher Education Law Roundtable at the University of Houston Law Center; and a past chair of the Education Law Section at the American Association of Law Schools. He also served for many years as Special Counsel to the Office of General Counsel and was the Founding Director of the Law and Public Policy Program at Catholic University.

Professor Kaplin received the American Council on Education's Borden Award, recognizing his authorship of *The Law of Higher Education* (1st ed. 1978). He also has been honored through the establishment, by Stetson University College of Law, of the William A. Kaplin Award for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy Scholarship, a national award presented annually to a leading scholar in the field.<sup>4</sup>

As a friend, mentor, scholar, and stalwart contributor to NACUA's mission to advance the practice of higher education attorneys for the benefit of the institutions they serve, Professor Kaplin led a life that exemplifies NACUA's core values of quality, service, civility, collegiality, diversity, inclusiveness, and respect. The field of higher education law and NACUA are demonstrably better because of the life he lived. While he will be missed, his legacy shall endure.

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2 Madelyn Wessel, *Life Member Award Nomination*, NAT'L ASS'N COLL. UNIV. ATT'YS (2017) (on file with NACUA).

3 Barbara Lee, *Life Member Award Nomination*, NAT'L ASS'N COLL. UNIV. ATT'YS (2017) (on file with NACUA).

4 See *William A. Kaplin Award – National Conference on Law and Higher Education*, STETSON L., <https://www.stetson.edu/law/conferences/highered/home/william-a-kaplin-award-national-conference.php> (last visited Sept. 7, 2025).