

# Law Integral to Society, says Vanderbilt General Counsel

GCC Profile

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## Law Integral to Society, says Vanderbilt General Counsel

By Jen Woods

With about 1 million practicing attorneys in the United States, it is often argued that there are too many lawyers. However, according to one attorney, quality is more important than quantity. "We don't have enough good lawyers," said David Williams, Vice Chancellor, General Counsel, and Secretary of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN.



Williams, who has spent the last 10 years analyzing transition governments such as South Africa's, said that the law is an integral part of society. "One of the major threads that holds us together is adherence to the law," he added.

Williams first became interested in the law midway through college, and as soon as he enrolled in law school, he knew he had made the right decision. On the "first day of law school, I knew this was what I wanted to do," said Williams, who earned his J.D. from the University of Detroit and his LL.M. in Taxation from New York University School of Law.

Today, Williams still feels passionate about his career choice. "I love the whole

area of the law, he said.

As General Counsel of Vanderbilt University, Williams oversees the 11-member legal department, as well as the office of risk management, the university's compliance and conflict of interest functions, and the operations of the university's board of trust. In addition, the division of student life and the department of athletics also report to Williams.

### *Advice to Young Lawyers*

"You have to be well-versed in understanding the business of your client," Williams said.

"You need to understand you're not the talent," he added. When you are the general counsel of a university, the faculty members are the talent. Unlike lawyers in private practice, in-house lawyers are rarely in the spotlight. Instead "lawyers are clearly support people," he said.

"It's a job where you never get bored because you're always doing something new," Williams said. He handles everything from employment issues, including contract negotiations, to risk management. On any given day he is prepared to handle almost anything (except for criminal and domestic issues).

The University of Vanderbilt is one of the larger colleges in the country, with more than 11,000 students. As the general counsel of such a big institution, Williams must be prepared to handle large-scale legal issues from time to time.

For instance, one of the major cases he worked on involved litigation with the United Daughters of the Confederacy. In 2002, the Tennessee division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy sued Vanderbilt University for deciding to remove the word "confederate" from a building the group helped pay for.

However, the lawsuit did not have a positive outcome for Vanderbilt, and in 2005, the university announced that it would not change the building's name.

Currently, Williams is involved with litigation against ICOS, arguing that three of the university's scientific researchers should have been named on the patent for Cialis, a drug used to treat erectile dysfunction. The lawsuit was filed in July 2005, and a trial date has been set for March 2007.

Williams, who earned a B.S. and M.S. from Northern Michigan University and an M.B.A. from the University of Detroit, is also a professor at the law school. He teaches and conducts research on issues pertaining to sports law, education and law, higher education administration and law, and discrimination law and education.

"I like teaching pretty much everything," Williams said. But if he had to name his favorite class, it would probably be "Introduction to Tax," a course he has not taught for six or seven years.

Another class he enjoys teaching is "Introduction to Law." He said it has been fulfilling "teaching kids who had no conception or who had misconceptions about the law." The last time he taught the course, there were only 15 students in the class, and he finds it "remarkable" that about 10 to 11 of them still keep in touch.

**Q. What do you do for fun?**

A. Read, watch movies, travel, and spend time with my wife and kids.

**Q. What CD was most recently in your CD player?**

A. A collection of Motown songs.

**Q. What is the last book you read?**

**Q. What are your favorite TV shows?**

A. *Frasier*, *The Sopranos*, and anything on public TV.

**Q. Who are your role models?**

A. My mother and Nelson Mandela.

Williams has also taught at the law schools of the University of Detroit, Capital University, and Ohio State University. In addition, he directed the Ohio State University Law Program in Oxford, England, and was elected Outstanding Law Professor at both the University of Detroit and Ohio State University.

Williams is a member of the state bars of Tennessee and Michigan, as well as the District of Columbia Bar. He is an active member of the American Corporate Counsel Association, the National Association of College and University Attorneys (NACUA), and the American Bar Association, as well as the continuing legal education committees of both the Nashville Bar Association and the NACUA.

Williams is also a member of the American Law Institute, an arbitrator for the National Association of Securities Dealers, Inc., and a member of the Harry Phillips Inn of Court. As a member of ABA's business law section, Williams co-chairs the corporate counsel committee. He has served on a number of ABA-accreditation site visits to law schools, as well, and is a member of the membership review committee of the Association of American Law Schools (AALS).

Despite his busy schedule, Williams is active in many community organizations. He is the treasurer of the Nashville Symphony's board of directors and the chair of its finance committee. He is a board member of the

YMCA of Middle Tennessee, Adventure Science Center, Boys and Girls Club, OASIS, W.O. Smith Music School, Second Harvest, 100 Black Men of Middle Tennessee, United Way of Metropolitan Nashville, and the Nashville Rotary. He also coaches youth basketball for the West Nashville Sports League and is a timer for the Nashville Aquatic Club.

## On the Net

Vanderbilt University

[www.vanderbilt.edu](http://www.vanderbilt.edu)

Tennessee Bar Association

[www.tba.org](http://www.tba.org)

Association of Corporate Counsel

[www.acca.com](http://www.acca.com)