

# Interdisciplinary Center Tackling Issues of Work, Social Capital

**W**HEN MARION CRAIN, the Wiley B. Rutledge Professor of Law, became director of the law school's Center for Interdisciplinary Studies on January 1, 2010, she took over a program that for 10 years had successfully created opportunities for faculty to expand their work across disciplines both within and outside of Washington University.

The center presented conferences on cutting-edge topics featuring professors from other areas in addition to law—professors who ordinarily might not have had the chance to work together.

“John Drobak, the previous director, did a great job of putting this unique program on the map,” says Crain, who joined the law faculty in 2008 from the University of North Carolina, where she was the Paul Eaton Professor of Law and director of the Center on Poverty, Work, and Opportunity.

“For the center's next phase of development, Dean Syverud encouraged me to pursue directions that overlap with my own research interests,” she adds.

Under Crain's leadership, the center will pursue research themes relating to work and social capital. The center's new focus on work includes special attention to issues of social class, race, and gender—interests that originated with Crain's undergraduate training in social work.

Crain's passion for work law dates to her second year of law school. “I had been hired as a summer associate for a Los Angeles firm specializing in litigation,” recalls Crain. But the recession of 1982 hit. Crain was laid off when she reported for her first day of work.

“After I got over the shock, I found a job with the only firm that was hiring—a small, union-side plaintiff's labor and employment practice,” she says.

Crain found that she loved the work and continued on a part-time basis until completing law school at the University of California–Los Angeles. She then took a job with Latham & Watkins, joining its management-side labor and employment group.

Crain's interest in labor issues deepened as she began her teaching career at West Virginia University, located in an area



MARY BURTUS

Professor Marion Crain, left, meets with the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Work and Social Capital's Advisory Board.

rich in the culture of class struggle and labor unionism in the coal mines. Influenced by colleagues who focused on the construction of power and powerlessness, she also developed an interest in critical theory, particularly feminist legal theory and critical race theory. She obtained grants to study the underrepresentation of women in the labor movement, including one from the National Science Foundation.

The Washington University community did not have to wait long to see how Crain's hard-won expertise in work, class, gender, and race will guide the law school's newly renamed Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Work and Social Capital.

“I wanted to start with a bang,” Crain says, listing February and March talks and receptions that featured Wilma Liebman, chair of the National Labor Relations Board lecturing on the revival of American labor law; Devon Carbado of the University of California–Los Angeles discussing the challenges of anti-discrimination policy in the Obama era; and Regina Austin of the University of Pennsylvania examining the portrayal in nonfiction film of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. The lectures were also part of the law school's Public Interest Law & Policy Speakers Series. The center then convened a panel on “Labor and Migration Effects of Human Trafficking” in conjunction with a University-wide anti-trafficking initiative, featuring national experts on the topic.

In March, the center hosted its first scholarly roundtable related to its new focus. *For Love or Money?* focused on the con-



sequences of how relationships are categorized in law—in particular, the distinction between those that arise through love, and those that arise from what Crain calls “economic expediency or profit-seeking.”

“The roundtable explored questions about why this distinction has been important in law and culture,” Crain says. Papers from the roundtable will be published in the *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy*.

The center’s day-to-day focus will be projects directed by affiliated faculty members. Each project will run for two to three years, facilitate collaboration across disciplines, and typically result in a new course, scholarly roundtable, conference, or publication.

Current project faculty leaders and topics include:

- Marion Crain and Robert Pollak, *Time and the Work/Family Life Cycle*;
- Adrienne Davis, *Black Sexual Economies*; and
- Laura Rosenbury, *Sex, Gender, and Society*.

“The center’s long-term goal is to enrich the research and learning of affiliated faculty and their students by connecting them with research on similar problems in other disciplines,” Crain says. “Ultimately, we hope that this will produce deeper insight into social problems and more creative solutions.” ||||

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