

Interview with SGPP Adjunct Instructor Retired Tucson Police Department Captain, Richard Harper

What influenced your decision in your career to join the School of Government & Public Policy (SGPP)?

During my time as an undergraduate at the University of Arizona I had outstanding professors, and there were three that had a direct impact on my future as a law enforcement officer. Primarily, Dr. Sanford Shoultz was my mentor as I tried to determine what level of law enforcement I would prefer as a profession. Like many university students in school back then and even today, the “Alphabet Agencies” like the FBI were considered desired positions. Dr. Shoultz shared stories with me about his time as a city police officer in St. Louis. In these stories he helped me to understand the importance of public service, accountability and the satisfaction that comes with helping others. He never shared a story of wild high-speed chases or shootings but rather just the day-to-day efforts to help people have a better quality of life. From Dr. Bela Rektor I learned how important the police are and the challenges they face in protecting a free society and from Dr. Elliot I learned about “Community Policing,” where the focus is on collaborating with the community, that college graduates will be the leaders of law enforcement in the future who will help implement these kinds of necessary changes and defocus law enforcement away from the military and more towards community support. So, I chose local law enforcement and put into practice all of these lessons and the education I received at the University of Arizona. Interestingly Dr. Elliot’s granddaughter was enrolled in two of my classes!

What was your inspiration to apply for Adjunct instructor here at the University?

My professors at the University of Arizona inspired me as an undergrad in 1973-74 to commit to public service and I can truly say that I had a rewarding career as a result. I wanted to do the same for our current students, I want them to find their passion in whatever level of public service they choose and to make a difference for others. The students know how critical the tasks are before them and they are stepping up! We will see many, many leaders in the criminal justice system who have graduated from the University of Arizona. I hope one day some of them will come back to pay it forward.

What has been your most inspirational moment working for the University?

I’ve had so many from the very shy student who could hardly participate in group discussion to standing up and giving a presentation to an auditorium filled with students and families at the Native American Convocation. I don’t think the student ever imagined that scenario! I think the other inspirational moment came during the pandemic and zoom class. At the end of that semester all of the class held up these incredibly supportive and appreciative messages for me to read. We were all physically separated but when zoom came on, the students were eager to learn and participate. I share a special bond with all of my students, but especially those from that pandemic time when there was so much fear and distractions in our lives. I am so thankful for all of my students and am lucky to work with our highly professional instructional and support staff for the SGPP. Our students are the best!

From all the courses you’ve taught, what’s the one course you find most intriguing and rewarding?

The Nature of Murder, I love the energy, enthusiasm, and curiosity the students bring to the class and the hard work they put into tracking all of the local area murders during the semester along with the comprehensive analytical reports they submit at the end of the semester. I watch our students grow when the family of a homicide victim comes to class to share their story and journey after the murder of a loved one. This one day is a paradigm changer for our students, the dynamics are powerful, deep and long lasting as they see and hear first-hand the impact of violence.

What is something interesting, unique that you enjoy about your position now?

What is interesting to watch is the intellectual growth and the maturation of the students over the course of the classes I teach. It’s satisfying to start with the hesitancy of the students to “jump in” and participate and end with them running the discussions! I enjoy it when our students share in my class the knowledge, they have learned from other criminal justice courses, and will share during discussion how these intersect. My hat is off to our great instructional staff here with SGPP!