Throughout the first decade of her career working in private practice, and now nearing that same milestone with the Northern Illinois University College of Law, Laurel Rigertas has always been drawn to the ethical codes of conduct that guide the legal profession.

Today, as an Associate Professor, Rigertas teaches Professional Responsibility, Torts and Lawyering Skills, and has become a highly respected scholar on professionalism, legal ethics and affordable access to the legal system for all citizens.

Yet, even in the early days of her legal training, as an articles editor of the Minnesota Law School’s Law & Inequality, a biannual journal dedicated to examining the social impact of law on the disadvantaged, Rigertas (J.D. 1997, magna cum laude) recalls being fascinated by the roles and responsibilities lawyers embrace in society. “Over time, I have learned that lawyers must cultivate a unique sense of professional identity, often quite different than that of other professionals. They must recognize not only how to place their clients’ interests above their own, but as the main gateway between individuals and an increasingly complex system of justice, lawyers must also manage the balance between duty-to-client and duty to that system.”

Guidelines on professional conduct and ethics for lawyers have been published, debated and revised. Generally driven by bar associations across the nation, though also driven by case precedent, the dialogues can be equally thoughtful and provocative – and are often highly charged. And yet, as Rigertas explains, from an academic perspective, these issues are generally taught in only one required upper-level, two-classroom. “At NIU, we have been looking for ways to integrate this knowledge throughout our legal curriculum and, in particular, to introduce the ideas to our first-year students.”

And she has found a champion in the law school’s Dean Jennifer Rosato. In 2011, with the Dean as a primary catalyst, the law school launched a requisite lecture series on professionalism for all first-year students. Funded through the generosity of Chenlin (J.D. ’78) and Michael Murzer, the series is a collaborative effort by numerous faculty members, including Professor Rigertas – bringing together renowned legal practitioners and law school professors to talk to first-year law students about controversial and thought-provoking legal ethics issues. Topics are initially discussed in classroom settings and then followed by “Continue the Conversation” receptions or dinners with legal practitioners from across Illinois invited to join the students in extended informal discussions.

This well-received series has included titles such as “Representing the Unpopular Client”, “Moral Consciousness and the Effective Advocate”, and “Client Confidentiality – The Alton Logan Case.” The discussions clearly demonstrate the importance of understanding professional ethics and values. This latter topic, for example, allowed the students to grapple with the implications of their duty of confidentiality to their clients. Rigertas gave a lecture on the duty of client confidentiality and then the students heard from an attorney involved in the highly controversial, nationally publicized case involving Alton Logan – a man who spent 26 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. The attorneys representing a different man revealed that their client had confessed to the crime years earlier, but that they had to wait until their client had died to share the information – due to their duty of confidentiality to their client. The topic provides a watershed moment in discussions of professionalism and client confidentiality – a moment not lost in Professor Rigertas’ curriculum.

Rigertas now works to incorporate facets of professionalism throughout her coursework – and encourages the same of her fellow faculty. There are countless examples where the professional conduct of an attorney has shifted the court’s attention away from plaintiff and defendant and, unfavorably, towards the attorney. Frivolous claims, unpreserved objections, and conflicts of interest are all situations where a lawyer’s lack of adherence to professional standards can have significant bearing on the outcome of a case.

Rigertas has had firsthand experience with the ethical challenges lawyers can face, first with Jenner & Block and then with Michael Best & Friedrich LLP, where she practiced complex commercial litigation as an associate, and as a partner, in Chicago. Litigating cases at the trial and appellate levels as well as in arbitrations and mediations, Rigertas learned well how to navigate uncertainty. “Professionalism is not always charged with black and white rules,” she affirms. “Rules of Professional Conduct provide lawyers with a framework to address ethical problems, but they do not prescribe an answer for every problem. This characteristic of uncertainty is exactly the reason why law students need more practice exercising their judgment when conflicting responsibilities are encountered.”

“Integration of professionalism concepts across the curriculum is a good first step,” she continues. “Ideally, I envision hands-on ethics clinics, where students and licensed attorneys work together to facilitate topical public discourse, address case-specific ethics issues, and potentially even partner with bar associations so students could participate in drafting ethics opinions on real-world professional ethics matters.” Giving students a low-risk environment, where they can experience and address the types of issues that often challenge their predisposed value systems, is the best way for them to learn of the dynamic nature of professional responsibility. She adds, “It’s just so meaningful to see them exercise their judgment as they endeavor to learn the rule of law.”