Abbie Willard doesn’t believe that careers need to follow road maps.

“The question that used to be popular—‘What do you see yourself doing in five years or 10 years?’—is a terrible question,” said Willard, who retired this summer after 16 years as the Law School’s associate dean for career services and policy initiatives. “You have no way to know that. And if you think you know, you ignore the most fascinating and interesting opportunities that might present themselves.”

Willard knows this from experience: she built an entire career by taking advantage of every bump, twist, and turn she encountered, often parlaying roadblocks into springboards.

In her 20s, Willard had planned to teach college-level poetry. She earned a PhD in English at the University of Illinois—just as the market for English professors was declining. She and her classmates had to compete with a glut of contenders for the same rare spots. But rather than worry solely about herself, Willard—the head of the graduate student organization—took on her first career services challenge, successfully lobbying the administration for more support for job seekers.

When she formally began her work in career services at the University of Georgia School of Law, she initially envisioned another challenge: she thought she’d have trouble transitioning from academic to academic administrator.

“But the adjustment turned out to be easy because I found I enjoyed managing a broad range of staff with different ideas,” she said.

Willard then moved to Georgetown University Law Center, where she worked for 21 years. When she encountered the legal market downturn in 1981, she responded as she would in future downturns: by helping
students and alums create new paths by “narrowing in on their strengths and making them stretch,” said Marcia Pennington Shannon, who worked with Willard for 10 years at Georgetown.

“Abbie’s philosophy was that we could not know what was ahead for people, but that we give them the confidence to keep going,” said Shannon, who now heads Georgetown Law’s Office of Career Strategy.

As Willard continued to draw her own map—and counsel law students to do the same—she built a reputation as a national leader in legal career services.

By the time she arrived at the University of Chicago Law School in 2003, Willard had already served as president of the National Association for Law Placement (NALP), chaired NALP’s Research and Education Foundation, and helped coordinate an unprecedented national longitudinal study of lawyer careers called After the JD, which tracked for 12 years the careers of a cohort of lawyers admitted to the bar in 2000. Willard is a major reason that law schools began using research data to understand placement, said NALP Executive Director James Leipold, who has known Willard for years. But he credits her with more than that.

“Abbie’s impact in the law placement arena goes far beyond research initiatives about lawyer careers. Her tenure with NALP coincided with the professionalization of career services,” Leipold said. “She helped shape the profession by contributing on every level.”

During her 16 years at the Law School, she helped create what Dean Thomas J. Miles, the Clifton R. Musser Professor of Law and Economics, calls “the finest career services department in the country.”

“Under Abbie’s leadership we have seen exemplary employment rates, a substantial increase in public service hiring and support for public service careers, great growth in our clerkship hiring, and many other milestones,” he said. “Abbie deeply cares about each and every one of our students and works tirelessly to assist every single one in meeting their individual goals. Those who have never experienced a career services office other than ours may not know just how extraordinary it is. The combination of compassion and expertise Abbie brought to the Law School is rare and extraordinary.”

### An Exceptional Legacy

At the Law School, Willard is known for having exerted her influence in subtle, appropriate, and persuasive ways. According to one Law School colleague, she is the opposite of a bully—she encourages, reassures, and is cool headed. Another said Willard sees big changes before they happen because she sits back and listens to take in the broad picture. Former students say she displayed conviction and transparency.

Over the last 12 years, as Lisa A. Brown, ’95, moved from practicing lawyer to law firm management roles, Willard’s guidance was pivotal because of her wisdom, perceptiveness, and deep sense of empathy.

“Abbie is a gifted mentor because of her unvarnished candor and willingness to not just talk through hard issues but offer her view of what the ‘right’ result was,” Brown said. “So few people are willing to do the latter.”

Many with whom Willard worked say she was instrumental to their professional growth, including her successor Lois Casaleggi (see story, p. 26), who applied to work at the Law School in 2004 in part because of Willard’s reputation as a career services all-star.

“When a position came open in the Law School, I wasn’t looking, but I knew I had to apply,” Casaleggi said. “It was an enormous opportunity to work with, and be led by, Abbie Willard.”

Casaleggi said that the economic downturn of 2008 was one of the biggest challenges she has confronted since working in career services. Some law firms deferred offers and some students lost jobs. According to Casaleggi, the Law School weathered the downturn because Willard was nimble and taught her staff to adapt. They put a comprehensive strategy in place, reaching out to each student to assess the level of impact and offer guidance, and connecting with law firms to get a sense for their needs and plans. They started a deferred students’ listserv and built a communications plan that included regular emails to students with advice about navigating their deferral period.

“We talked about using this time to build legal skills by volunteering, and stressed the importance of preparing for the bar exam,” Casaleggi said. “We encouraged them to stay in touch with the firms during the deferral period, and counseled them on how to approach that communication. We offered information on student loan issues, on finding public interest work, and emphasized the importance of networking. Abbie heard a call to action, and she responded by targeting resources to best serve our students.”

Under Willard’s leadership, the Law School’s career services office has focused on expanding students’ access to
many different legal employment paths, including judicial clerkships, firms, public service, academia, and business. It has also focused on preparing students for other changes in the marketplace.

“Employer demands today are different because client demands are different. At the same time, many different generations are all working at once. There are bound to be clashes,” Casaleggi said. “But instead of being daunted, Abbie looks at multigenerational differences as a way to learn how to effectively communicate with students.”

Besides being nimble, a practice Willard adopted in the career services office was to work with students one-on-one. Students are not assigned a particular counselor and instead self-select. Willard believes in finding an organic fit. She extends this idea to staff.

“Abbie’s philosophy is if [staff] are growing and developing and satisfied, this will transfer to students,” Casaleggi said.

For example, Willard encouraged Casaleggi to get certified in administering the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) test. The MBTI measures on which side a person leans in four areas: Extraversion vs. Introversion, Sensing vs. Intuition, Thinking vs. Feeling, and Judging vs. Perceiving, and identifies a person’s strengths.

“Abbie and I are very different, I am ISTJ (Introversion Sensing Thinking Judging), and Abbie is INFP (Introversion Intuition Feeling Perceiving),” Casaleggi said. “Abbie’s ‘P’ is a thing to behold. She is comfortable with ambiguity and very flexible and does not have to rush to judgment. She isn’t laissez-faire, but she doesn’t often push an agenda or timetable. I have learned a lot from that element of her.”

Casaleggi explained that after learning to administer the MBTI to students, career services staff were able to understand the students better and then use the students’ cues to counsel accordingly.

“Abbie’s impact at this school and in career services cannot be overstated,” Casaleggi said. “She is a giant in the field, but everyone she works with is included and asked to contribute. She is so good at what she does.”

Director of Career Services Paul Woo, who also retired this summer (see story, p. 25), puts it another way.

“Abbie knows how to find that balance point of letting go and untethering while at the same time communicating that she always has your back,” Woo said. “She can laser in on things and tell you what you need to hear. She also never overreacts.”

Susan Staab, the director of judicial clerkship outreach and support, said Willard’s impact is not easy to describe.

“Abbie has a way of looking at things differently than others. When the 2008 recession happened, instead of waiting to see what firms would do, she just picked up the phone and asked directly about what they wanted,” Staab said. “If something isn’t working, Abbie finds a way to fix it.”

Willard is an expert needlepointer and stitcher, which demands extreme precision. According to Staab, Willard’s work is beautiful, but the kind of precision the art demands is the opposite of Willard’s workplace demeanor.

“Abbie isn’t rigid,” Staab said. “She listens and will change course after hearing what others have to say. She is always asking and having us ask, ‘How will this develop the students or the institution?’ Everything she does is through the lens of how it will help others.”

As Willard puts it, “If you contribute nothing else to an environment, it should be to support others, to bring them along, to mentor them, and to help them play to their own strengths.”

The Changing Legal Marketplace

The legal profession and law schools have experienced major shifts in the past three decades—and that has meant

Willard takes a break from slicing and serving at the Law School’s annual November pie event in 2010.
that career counselors need to adjust, often by encouraging students to pursue the skills the profession demands. Market downturns in the early 1990s and late 2000s led to a growing demand for real-world skills and wellness programming—many of which the Law School also has met through experiential course offerings and orientation programs like the Kapnick Leadership Development Initiative.

“Prior to the downturns, you could be the brightest person in the room and you’d get a job,” Willard said. After every downturn, it became clear that you couldn’t just be the brightest person in the back office. Firms wanted students with social skills. Law schools were challenged to provide classes about interactional skills that they didn’t need to teach in the past.”

What’s more, senior law firm attorneys often lack the time to train younger associates because they are so focused on their own profit margins, which puts additional pressure on students to show that they are acquiring the skills in law school or on their own. As these changes took hold, instead of lamenting the shift, Willard adapted, digging in to find ways to help both firms and students.

Nearly 10 years ago when Brown was working at Schiff Hardin LLP, the firm developed an innovative approach to law student interviewing that was more intensive and rigorous for candidates and the firm, but allowed the firm to better get to know the students as individuals.

The firm’s recruiting team presented the new approach to key feeder law schools, and the Law School—Willard in particular—was unique in its response.

“Abbie provided candid and constructively critical feedback on our proposed approach and—most importantly—concrete, specific suggestions for how to make it a better system for students and the firm,” Brown said. “And after we put the new system in place, she was unique in providing us with students’ feedback (anonymous, of course)—both positive and negative.”

According to Brown, Willard continued to help the firm shape and refine its interview process and maintain its strong reputation at the Law School.

“Abbie is open-minded and flexible in her thinking. She’s
a great problem solver. She’s creative and pragmatic—and, in my experience, few people are both,” Brown said.

Willard likes to take the pulse of things, be it the evolving legal landscape, responding to declines in entry-level clerkships, or cuts in public interest job funding. Leipold described Willard as an industry analyst who always studied the larger forces at play.

“For her whole career, Abbie asked, ‘What will the students do, and how can we prepare them for a changing job market?’” Leipold said.

Willard says the kinds of jobs now available for students are more diverse than they were 20 years ago, and that is a good thing. While the Law School’s most popular path for Law School graduates is still law firms, business has become more popular.

“Law school has primarily fed very large, very traditional law firms, but some of that is changing,” Willard said, noting that the Law School now offers joint degrees, as well as the certificate-granting Doctoroff Business Leadership Program.

“Some of our students who go to traditional law firms tell us that what they’re really interested in is start-up work.”

For her part, Willard said when choosing and training staff to help students navigate the opportunities and find their career paths, she never wanted to recreate a certain model or to bring in people with the same perspectives and approaches.

“Careers are organic and take on a life of their own, and you have to be open to that,” she said. “Otherwise, you’re going to miss the more exciting opportunities. I’ve tried to use that in my counseling with law students. I’ve tried to use it in my managing of staff. I’ve used it in raising my own children.”

Willard’s own map continues to be one she draws as she goes along. She says she will miss the students, faculty, her team, and the rhythm of an academic year.

She does not exactly know where retirement will lead her, but she has a house in Arizona where she loves to hike, five assertive granddaughters she wants to get to know better, and two major writing projects, one a historical novel based on her father’s experience in World War II.

As she described what might come next, she smiled. The path is, as always, a fascinating opportunity.