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Meet Judith W. Spain: Compliance should be ‘in the room where it happens’

By Judith W. Spain, JD, CCEP, and Adam Turteltaub

AT: Before we get into your career, I want to talk about something I have noticed about you: You love sharing your knowledge with others in compliance. You’ve written books and book chapters. You have done a ton of speaking at conferences and through webinars. And now you serve on the board of SCCE & HCCA. What drives that considerable investment of time and thought?

JS: My favorite play is *Hamilton*, and my favorite line is, “Why do you write like you are running out of time?” One thing I have learned over 40 years since graduating from law school is that time is fleeting. Over the years, I have focused my efforts on providing practical guidance to assist fellow professionals. So, if any of my writings or presentations can make the work of any institution or compliance professional a bit easier, or perhaps provide a guide to avoid mistakes that we all have made, or encourage continued commitment to the field of ethics and compliance, then the investment of time and thought is well worth the effort. I believe we all share a responsibility to give back to the profession and help guide those who are new in the field. Whether we do this through writings and presentations, mentoring, or modeling ethical behavior, our efforts are necessary to benefit the compliance profession and society. Personally, I have no intention of slowing down my commitment to writing, although I do admit that pickleball is calling my name more and more.

AT: What advice would you give others who may be hesitating to step forward and contribute so publicly?

JS: Continuing the *Hamilton* analogy, you simply need to be “in the room where it happens.” You cannot be sitting on the sidelines waiting to be invited into the conversation; rather, you need to make the effort to place yourself in a situation where you can contribute to the profession. I have experienced multiple rejections of a proposed presentation or a peer-reviewed journal submission. You just accept the rejection as a learning experience and decide to try again with a different topic, a rewrite of the article, or perhaps pursue a different avenue of expression. And, when you are finally accepted as a speaker and are making that presentation—or when you see your name as an author in a published journal or on a book cover—just stop and enjoy the moment.

AT: You’ve been in higher education for over 30 years now, starting out in teaching but mostly in compliance and legal roles. What drew you to the higher education world?

JS: My mother was a teacher, and I just always presumed that I would follow in her footsteps. Law school drew me in, but after years of public and private practice, I realized that helping students understand the law before they got in trouble with the law was much more rewarding to me. Then, after teaching for years, I realized that my true calling was working with students, faculty, and administration to better understand their legal and ethical obligations. Moving into compliance was just the next logical step for me.

I have been fortunate to work for amazing bosses who encouraged me to write in the field of ethics and social responsibility and then to move into higher education administration and the compliance field. They took a risk promoting a tenured faculty member into various administrative roles and then to general counsel and then to chief ethics and compliance officer. Higher education is like that—mentoring individuals to help them achieve their potential. This is why I have such a strong commitment to higher education and mentoring others as I have been mentored.

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