

Richard Champagne: Legislative Reference Bureau Director

Curious about researching and practicing law dealing with the major issues of the day? Rick Champagne, director of the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau, talks about working for the oldest nonpartisan bill drafting and legal research agency in the United States.

BY SHANNON GREEN

Rick Champagne has found an outlet for his interests in legislative institutions and their operations and in legislative law.

A 1992 graduate of the University of Wisconsin Law School, Champagne has worked for the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau (LRB) for more than three decades, where he has been director since 2014.

According to Champagne, if you're interested in legislative law, the LRB just may be a good fit. Here's more about his career and practicing law in a legislative setting.



What was your career like before you came to the LRB?

Before joining the LRB, I was an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at U.W.-Madison. I also taught in the Department of Government at the University of Essex in Great Britain. My research focus was American political institutions.

I left academics to attend law school, and upon finishing law school, I sought employment with the Wisconsin Legislature. Working at the LRB was an ideal fit for my interests: it has allowed me to pursue my interests in legislative institutions and their operations, state government, and legislative law.

My practice areas have evolved over the years. When I first joined the LRB, I drafted legislation and provided legal research and advice in public employment law, state finance and bonding, and the Wisconsin Retirement System. My current duties largely center on management and operations at the LRB, but I continue, in my capacity as general counsel, to provide legal advice and research in the areas of parliamentary procedure, constitutional law, and legislative operations.

Tell us about the Legislative Reference Bureau.

The LRB, founded in 1901, is the oldest nonpartisan bill drafting and legal research agency in the United States. In fact, it was the model for the Congressional Research Service.

We have about 20 attorneys and 10 research analysts. We draft legislation

and provide legal and information research for both political parties in the Wisconsin Assembly and Senate.

Typically, we draft about 6,500 bills each legislative session and fulfill about 3,500 research requests for legislators. The LRB also revises and publishes the Wisconsin Statutes, the laws of Wisconsin, and the Wisconsin Administrative Code and Wisconsin Administrative Register. We publish original research on legislative law, history, and operations, as well as the *Wisconsin Blue Book*, the authoritative almanac of Wisconsin government.

I often tell people that the LRB consists of a medium-size law firm, a research faculty, and a publishing house.

What do you do during a legislative session?

The 2025-26 legislative session is well underway. As of the end of January, we had already drafted almost 1,900 bills and fulfilled over 600 research requests. We are also currently drafting the governor's biennial budget bill, working with the Governor's Office and the Budget Office at the Department of Administration.

While the LRB considers legislators and committees its primary clients, Wisconsin law does require that the LRB also draft proposed legislation for the governor and the executive branch as well as the courts. The governor introduced his budget bill Feb. 18, and the LRB now is drafting the legislature's alternative to the governor's bill for the Joint Committee on Finance.

What do you do as LRB director?

I am ultimately responsible for agency operations and ensuring a high-quality and timely work product. But I have an incredible cadre of supervisors who oversee legal services, research services, and administrative services. Their efforts make the LRB a success and allow me to focus more on providing legal advice and research services directly to legislative leadership, offices, and committees.

In fact, during the last 18 months or so, I have also served in stretches as the Senate chief clerk, when vacancies in that office have occurred. That I have been able to hold the two positions is a testament to the high quality of LRB attorneys, editors, and research analysts.

What does a typical day look like?

My day begins early, typically by 7 a.m., and one of the first things I do is review the bill and research requests that have come in the previous day. This gives me a good sense of what issues are of concern to legislators and their constituents. I also look at turnaround time for bill and research requests.

Wisconsin consists of major cities, university towns, suburban communities, and rural areas. The legislation and research requests from legislators provide me with an unparalleled window on these communities and their concerns.

I will also stop by LRB supervisor offices to get a sense of how things are going, and I try to make sure that I stop by other attorney and analyst offices to touch base. In the Capitol, I regularly meet with senators and assembly members and their staffs. A typical day involves lots of communication!

What are the LRB's core functions?

The core functions of the LRB are bill drafting, legal services, and research. Every bill introduced in the legislature is drafted by an LRB attorney, often with years of experience in the bill's subject

matter. LRB attorneys work with legislative offices to identify the problem or issue that a legislator wishes to address. LRB legal advice is confidential, and offices can count on LRB attorney input for how best to pursue their goals.

I have often commented that the skill set of an LRB attorney is knowing which words to include or take out of the thousands of pages and millions of words of the Wisconsin statutes to achieve a legislator's goals.

It is not a skill set universally shared by other attorneys.

The LRB also provides legal research services. Many of the LRB's legal memos are jointly written by an attorney and a research analyst. This is done so that the LRB can provide not only legal opinions or discussions of legal issues but also empirical data that may bear on the legal issue. This combination of analysis and data is unique for many legal offices and serves the legislature well. In fact, LRB legal opinions and research are regularly cited in litigation by parties and the courts.

What do you enjoy about your job?

On the legal side, the most satisfying thing about the practice of law in a legislative setting is that the legal issues are among the most significant issues in law. The issues involve separation of powers, checks and balances, the administrative state, the governor's veto powers, legislative oversight of executive branch agencies, federalism, and a host of other issues that go to the core of Wisconsin state government.

On the legislative operations side, the Wisconsin Legislature is characterized by considerable turnover in members and staff. The LRB devotes a considerable amount of time to outreach and training new members and staff to navigate the legislative process. This is incredibly rewarding, and it allows offices to commence immediately their pursuit of legislation, oversight, and constituent services.

On the personal side, in my 32 years of LRB service I have met hundreds of legislators and staff from throughout Wisconsin. I have learned about Wisconsin through them and have come to appreciate the many faces of Wisconsin through our conversations. I consider many of them my friends.

Why should a lawyer consider working for the LRB?

I would encourage any attorney who desires to practice law dealing with the major issues of the day, who genuinely desires to help people, and who wishes to serve Wisconsin to pursue a career in the legislature.

The work hours may sometimes be long, but they will be rewarding. I can guarantee that attorneys who practice law in the state legislature will not be disappointed. **WL**

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