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William & Mary Law School Goes the Distance During COVID-19 Pandemic

By David F. Morrill

April 21, 2020

When it became apparent that the COVID-19 pandemic was a growing problem in early March, William & Mary Law School proceeded with determination and a careful eye to ensuring the health and safety of both the law community and the general public. To that end, students were asked not to return after spring break, and faculty began to teach remotely through the end of the semester.

And with that move, names such as Zoom and Panopto are now heard as much in everyday conversation as Westlaw and LexisNexis.

Professor Nate Oman, Rollins Professor of Law and Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Law and Markets, immediately set out to enhance his students' learning experience by reaching out to professors doing interesting work on contract law at other schools. The idea was to talk about their research interests.

By the second week of classes, Oman had recorded lectures from expert colleagues in his field on the enforcement of contracts outside the legal system; the legal issues presented by religious contracts; contracts in taboo markets such as organs, reproductive services, or sex; studies on the behavioral psychology of contracting; and so-called smart contracts.

"Each lecture is 20 to 30 minutes and I have been using them as an enrichment for our regular class discussion," Oman said.

The lectures take the form of a recorded Zoom conversation between Oman and the other professor, which he then makes available to students through the course website.

"All of the other professors I am interviewing are, of course, also teaching their students online, and I find that they have been very eager and generous in wanting to help out," Oman said.



Chancellor Professor of Law Laura Heymann has been happy with how the transition to distance learning has gone. She attributes much of the success to her students, whom she credits with really rising to the occasion.

“They’ve been keeping up with the reading and participating in every class, even with challenging personal circumstances,” Heymann said. “One of my students is now attending class in the early hours of the morning and another has young children at home, just to take two examples.”

Kelsey Reichardt J.D. '20, a single mom with a two year old who works with the Puller Veterans Benefits Clinic, is glad the virtual environment hasn't impacted students' ability to discuss and analyze legal issues or to have valuable and engaging discussions.

“All my professors have done a fantastic job of keeping the class informed of any schedule changes or technical issues with the system and they are still as responsive as ever to questions or concerns from the students regarding course readings or classwork, which has been really helpful,” Reichardt said.

Although Reichardt had to figure out new ways to get homework done while keeping her toddler entertained, she praises her professors for being extremely flexible.

“They've made it easy for me to continue with my classwork and stay informed,” Reichardt said. “I'm grateful for their support and understanding!”

For Mikaela Phillips J.D. '21, the transition to remote learning was not ideal, but she has been really impressed with how the faculty adapted and make the transition as smooth as possible.

“I think it's important to recognize that while this may be a new format to learn in for many students, it's also a new teaching format for our professors,” Phillips said. “I'm really thankful that in the days leading up to our first day of online classes that I was able to help a few professors test out the technology; I know it made me more comfortable knowing what this would look like before we started, but I also wanted to be there to help my professors feel comfortable as well.”

Several technological options were available to make the transition. Professor Heymann chose to conduct synchronous classes via Zoom and to engage with



students in much the same manner as she had in classes to provide some consistency during a time of upheaval.

“The only significant difference is that I’ve let students know in advance that they’ll be called on rather than cold calling, which makes things go a bit more smoothly,” Heymann said. “I also make recordings of the class session available for the students in case they aren’t able to attend on a particular day.”

In the classroom, Heymann would sometimes have students talk about hypotheticals in small groups before returning to the larger discussion. To replicate that online, she has taken advantage of Zoom’s breakout rooms feature. It’s a chance for students to hear each other’s voices more, which Heymann believes is important when they’re physically far apart.

“Of course, it’s not the same as being together in the classroom; I miss hearing the ambient noises of shared understanding (or confusion) or the laughter when a student says something funny,” Heymann said. “And I suspect that students miss the easy ability to stay after class for a few minutes to ask a question or share some news. They can still do that, of course, but I’m sure it doesn’t feel quite the same to them as being face-to-face. But we’re all doing the best we can, and I’m really grateful that the students are doing such a great job.”

Caleb Stone, Professor of the Practice at the Lewis B. Puller, Jr. Veterans Benefits Clinic, has traditionally held a class debate where students take different positions on how to reform the VA system. Now working online, he turned the debate into a policy discussion, sent a PDF to his students and held an online roundtable discussion.

“The students have been great. They’re in it to win it,” Stone said.

Stone also praises his students in the Legal Practice program as they perfect legal writing skills during their first year of law school.

“They’ve adjusted to it as well as possible,” Stone said. “They’re going to try really hard for their final assignment because it’s important to them that they’re educating themselves as well as possible to put themselves in the best position for the job market after law school.”



Connor Symons J.D. '22 thinks this semester offers a unique benefit to legal writing students, especially now that pass/fail has been implemented.

“It is true that graded writing classes show employers how well our writing stacks up against our classmates, but pass/fail allows us the freedom to experiment and push our boundaries without fear of losing a critical point or two,” Symons said. “I am trying to view this as an opportunity for growth.”

Likewise, Alexandra Fellows J.D. '22 doesn't consider online learning to be ideal, but she sees a great benefit from the experience in the long run.

“What we have gained from moving online is a priority-check and a moment for our school to step up and support one another—and it did,” Fellows said. “Now, heading into finals season, summer, and moving into next fall, I don't think any students, professors, administration, or staff members will take for granted the value of walking into the law school, seeing a familiar face, in-class instruction, and of personally feeling the support of a community.”