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Roger Williams University School of Law

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Dean Yelnosky's Post

Affordable Excellence Is About Leadership

Posted by Michael Yelnosky on 10/29/2014 at 10:11 AM

RWU Law has always been more affordable than most of our peer schools. Last year we took a bold step and widened that gap considerably by reducing our tuition by 18% and freezing tuition for each year of a law student's course of study. We recognized what too many schools want to deny - that the job market for lawyers has softened and that reducing graduates' debt makes it easier for them to find their way in that market. [The Wall Street Journal and other national publications noticed our leadership on affordability.](#)

But there is no quick fix to the debt problem. Thus, we have extended our tuition reduction and freeze for students enrolling in the law school next year, in fall 2015. [We will remain the most affordable ABA-accredited private law school in the Northeast, and we expect the affordability gap to widen. We extended our tuition reduction because it was the right thing to do.](#)

RWU Law has always provided experiential learning opportunities for our students because we believe that learning practical skills and forming a professional identity is a core part of a legal education. Indeed, even when we opened our doors over twenty years ago we **required** all students to take practical skills courses. Since then we have added an additional required semester of legal writing instruction. We now have three in-house clinics. We have clinical externships with state and federal judges, state and federal prosecutors, state and federal defenders, state and federal agencies, municipal law departments, civil legal services organizations, and environmental organizations, among others. Our Marine Affairs Institute houses the Sea Grant Law Fellows Program, which gives our student fellows the opportunity to research contemporary questions of marine law and policy for real clients. We have also added a unique corporate counsel externship program, which places students in the general counsels' offices of major corporations in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Add to all these our new Washington, D.C. semester in practice program, and we can say without any puffery that [the scope of our experiential learning programs is truly exceptional.](#) In fact, we are one of only a few schools that [guarantees](#) every student a substantial clinical experience.

As with our tuition reduction, the legal education industry is trying to catch up to us on this issue. After many years of study, this year the American Bar Association announced that accredited law schools must require all students to complete six credits in experiential courses. Our students have been doing that for years, and today our students can complete over twenty-four credits in courses that would count toward the ABA's new experiential education requirement – four times what the ABA now requires. To say that we have been a leader in integrating doctrinal and experiential education is an understatement.

Similarly, we have led the way in emphasizing to our students that they should take seriously one of the hallmark responsibilities of members of the legal profession – providing services to clients who cannot afford to pay. For fifteen years we have had a pro bono experiential learning graduation requirement. It now stands at 50 hours, notwithstanding that the ABA does not require law schools to impose any pro bono obligation on students. Many law schools have since followed in our footsteps. In 2012 the State of New York saw the wisdom of our approach and announced that prospective lawyers there had to complete 50 hours of pro bono work to be eligible for admission to the bar. Implementation of the rule was delayed until 2015 to give law schools time to create programs that would permit their students to complete the necessary pro bono hours. Our students would have been ready years ago. Moreover, we have been a leader in facilitating the pro bono work of practicing lawyers in Rhode Island. The Association of American Law Schools recently singled out our innovative Pro Bono Collaborative for recognition and encouraged other law schools to replicate the program. That is leadership.

Finally, we have shown not just that doctrinal and experiential education complement each other, but that the dichotomy between a “teaching faculty” and a “research faculty” is a false one. Our faculty are busy and excellent teachers, but they are busy and excellent scholars as well. A series of studies of the scholarly output of the faculty at most American law schools showed that the faculty at Roger Williams was far more productive than those at our peer schools. In fact, the latest iteration of the study, published in 2013, showed that in New England our faculty trailed only the faculty at Yale, Harvard, Boston University, and Boston College.

In these, and in other ways, we have been leading the way at Roger Williams for years, and we remain busy thinking about how to continue to improve our program to prepare students for the future, not for the past.