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Recommended Citation

Roger Williams University School of Law, "Newsroom: Master's in Law for Non-Lawyers" (2015). *Life of the Law School (1993-)*. 504.

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Newsroom

A Master's in Law for Non-Lawyers

Master of Studies in Law program offers legal education in a one-year program – another example of RWU Law's leadership in legal education innovation.



BRISTOL, R.I., September 10, 2015 – A Master's in Law for non-lawyers?

A new program for delivering legal education is coming to Rhode Island in the form of a one-year master's program at Roger Williams University School of Law, open to learners who seek deep exposure to law and legal methods in order to broaden their professional skill set or add value to their résumé, but do not want to be practicing attorneys.

Part of RWU Law's Master of Studies in Law (MSL) program (law.rwu.edu/MSL) will replicate the experience of a first-year J.D. student. MSL students will study such law school staples as torts, contracts, criminal law, and civil procedure alongside J.D. students, writing the same papers and taking the same exams.

But MSL candidates will also have access to higher-level elective law courses applicable to their particular career fields. And they will graduate after accumulating two semesters of credit instead of the six needed to earn a J.D. The first class of MSL candidates will matriculate in Fall 2016.

The program is a practical and forward-looking response to a fast-changing legal and business landscape that touches almost every aspect of life. The American Bar Association has appointed a Commission on the Future of Legal Services to study the implications of and solutions for these changes, while some states have begun experimenting on their own. For example, Washington recently passed a law allowing specially trained non-lawyers to perform certain limited legal services.

“Law now influences human activity as never before,” explained RWU Law Dean Michael J. Yelnosky. “One consequence is that a growing number of non-lawyers come into contact with lawyers and the law as a regular part of their work. As a result, many people would benefit from some rigorous legal training, but don’t need a J.D. Our MSL program is designed to serve people who are seeking that edge.”

The course of study will provide students with a solid legal foundation paired with a flexible and practical professional slant. “Students will gain a foundational understanding of law and the American legal system, while concentrating on the subject areas most important to their current or desired job,” said Thomas G. Shaffer, RWU Law’s Director of Admissions, who administers the program. “They will have the freedom, with the help of a faculty advisor, to design a course of study that permits them to specialize in the area they deem most important to their particular goals.”

Human resource professionals, for-profit and non-profit business managers, journalists, government employees, realtors, accountants, IT professionals, educators, compliance officers, and those who work in the criminal justice system and in various positions related to environmental law are among those who would benefit from this course of study, Shaffer said.

Yelnosky noted that the program is not intended to train lawyers or undermine traditional legal practice, but is simply a practical response to changing realities. “Master’s program graduates will not be lawyers and will not be able to practice law,” he said. “However, they will be better consumers of legal services; better at working with legal materials, such as statutes and regulations; better at communicating with lawyers, better at determining whether they need legal services; and better educated about the legal system, which has an increasing impact on all our lives. Master’s graduates will be a complement to and not a substitute for lawyers.”

Over the past few years, a dozen or so law schools around the country have established MSL programs; however, RWU Law and Northeastern University are the only law schools in New England with broad MSL programs.

“RWU Law has not achieved what it has by standing still and preparing students for the past,” Yelnosky said. “We are constantly innovating to offer our students programs that prepare them for the present and the future. The MSL is another exciting example of that kind of leadership.”