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Roger Williams University School of Law

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Newsroom

Yelnosky on Master of Studies in Law

Dean Michael J. Yelnosky explains why RWU is one of only a dozen or so law schools in the country offering an advanced degree in legal studies for non-lawyers.

From **RHODE ISLAND LAWYERS WEEKLY**: "[Dean: new MSL program poses no threat to lawyers](#)" by

Pat Murphy



October 16, 2015: Next fall, students who have no intention of ever becoming practicing attorneys will begin receiving legal training at Roger Williams University School of Law.

RWU will become one of only a dozen or so law schools across the country that offer an advanced degree in legal studies for non-lawyers. Dean Michael J. Yelnosky sees the school's Master of Studies in Law Program as answering the need for innovative ways to deliver legal education in a fast-changing legal and business landscape.

"A program like ours allows someone to make an investment [of time and money] that is more tailored to the amount of legal education that he or she really wants or needs," he says.

A portion of the one-year program will track the experience of first-year J.D. students with the study of core subjects such as contracts, criminal law and torts. In addition, MSL candidates will be able to tailor their studies to meet their individual professional needs by concentrating in 15 subject areas including business, employment and real property law. MSL students graduate after accumulating two semesters of credit instead of the six needed to earn a J.D. The MSL degree is awarded upon completion of 30 semester credit hours, with tuition set at \$977 per credit.

Since those with MSL degrees won't be licensed to practice law, Yelnosky says the program doesn't pose a serious threat to attorneys concerned about their bottom line. Yet he concedes that it is one more example of the wave of innovation transforming the legal industry, and notes that the state of Washington recently authorized "Limited License Legal Technicians," non-lawyers trained to provide a limited range of legal services in divorce and child custody matters.

Yelnosky spoke recently with Lawyers Weekly's Pat Murphy.



Q. *Is this program the first of its kind in New England?*

A. Yes, in the sense that it's not online [like Northeastern University's Master of Legal Studies Program], nor is it narrowly tailored to a particular subject matter. Yale has a long-standing program for journalists. Although journalists are a group who we think could benefit from [RWU Law's] program, ours is quite broad.

Q. *Why did the school decide to go in this direction?*

A. One reason is that we are the only source of legal training in the state. It occurred to us a gap exists in the way that legal education is currently packaged — that if you want legal training at an American law school, you basically have one option and that's to get the J.D.

Q. *What types of professionals do you think will be interested in obtaining an MSL degree?*

A. We're targeting people who don't want to practice law but who think that they'd do a better job in their current position, could move into a better position, or could enter the market with a skill set that would make them more attractive to potential employers.

One group that quickly comes to mind is people who work in human resources, who every day deal with a complex web of state, federal and sometimes local laws.

But we're also open to learning from potential students about other ways in which they might find some legal training helpful, so we've got this catchall provision that allows for self-designed programs. For example, someone might come in and say that they want a mix of immigration and international law because of the work they do. So we can self-design programs for students whose needs we haven't anticipated.

Q. Have you received much interest since you unveiled the program in September?

A. I don't know how many applications we've received, but we've had a lot of inquiries, both formal and informal. Word is getting out. People are thinking about this new animal and how it might be of use to them or somebody that they know.

Q. What if someone decides they actually want to become a lawyer after enrolling in your MSL program? Would their earned credits count toward a J.D.?

A. The American Bar Association prohibits non-matriculated law students from carrying credits over from any program. The reverse could happen, though. A J.D. student who decided they didn't want to be a lawyer but wanted to capture their investment could move from a J.D. program to a master's program. Those credits would transfer.

Q. Should lawyers feel threatened by this at all?

A. I don't think so. These folks with the master's degree will not be able to practice law. That is clear as a bell. If they did they'd be engaging in the unauthorized practice of law just like anybody who never had any legal training or somebody who got a J.D. but didn't pass the bar. Some lawyers will be dealing with more educated consumers of legal services, but I don't consider that as a threat.

The other thing that [those with MSL degrees] might do is not seek legal help at all because they think they don't have a legal problem. But I view this as really a complementary relationship. It's good for lawyers to have people out there who know a little bit about the law and maybe a lot about the particular type of law they deal with.

It is decidedly not something like Washington state allowing limited license legal technicians, people who are going to be able to practice in a limited area with a year and a half's worth of training.

Q. *But even though your program won't enable non-lawyers to actually practice law, isn't it at the very least a step in that direction?*

A. It could be, but it's really hard to look in the crystal ball and see where this is all going. There have been seismic changes in so many industries caused by technology. I would not have predicted five years ago that LegalZoom would have as much traction as it does. So, yes, it is entirely possible that other states will adopt something like the Washington limited license legal technicians. I do think it is likely that that will spread, but I don't think it will happen real fast. Although there are some national discussions taking place, there aren't discussions about that happening here in Rhode Island.