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## **Law School News: F.A.Q. Update: COVID-19 And RWU Law 03-30-2020**

Roger Williams University School of Law

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March 30, 2020

# ***Law School News***

## **F.A.Q. UPDATE: COVID-19 and RWU Law**

Ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic continue to evolve and multiply on an almost minute-to-minute basis. Here are the latest updates from RWU Law.

March 30, 2020



*“Hi everyone. I hope you’re all doing well. We really miss you. I’ve got to say, the thing that that is really striking – in talking to other faculty and to staff through meetings that we’ve been having remotely – is how much we miss the students. We miss having you in class, miss seeing you day to day. It was great being able to see members of my Con Law class today. But it’s of course not the same as being there in person.*”

*So we really want to make sure that everyone is doing okay and that any issues that you’re having, please get in touch with [me](#) or [Dean Yelnosky](#) or [Dean Lalli](#), or with any of your professors, because we’re determined to continue fulfilling our mission as a law school. We really care about our students. We want to make sure that everything is okay with you and that you are health and well. And to the extent that we can, that’s what we’re trying to do. Stay well and thank you for your patience and your hard work. It*

*turns out there's no playbook for a crisis like this. But please know that we'll be doing everything we can to try to help you navigate the extremely unusual and unprecedented circumstances that we find ourselves in."*

*~ Professor Jared A. Goldstein, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Virtual Town Hall Meeting, Thursday, March 26, 2020*

*"I encourage you to respond to the survey instruments that Dean Yelnosky has shared with you via email. It's helpful in that it gathers all your comments and feedback into one place. This is important, especially considering that we share these documents with our faculty to help them prepare for some of the decisions they'll be making. And certainly, if you as students are experiencing any individual impacts in light of the current crisis or have any individual questions, please [be in touch with me](#)."*

*~ Lorraine Lalli, Assistant Dean of Students, Virtual Town Hall Meeting, Thursday, March 26, 2020*

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Will the RWU Law campus reopen this semester?

It is now official that campus will remain closed for the duration of the spring semester. As of 6:00 p.m. on Friday, March 27, the building was locked, and it is now inaccessible. If there is some unique circumstance and you need to retrieve something from the building, please contact [Dean Lalli](#).

How are online classes working out so far?

Online classes, as you know, began on Monday, March 23, and – although the new format will definitely take some getting used to – the experience has been technically quite good. There have been a few audio and video problems, but they seem to be anomalous. The RWU Law administration and staff is working with the faculty to continually improve the online class experience. (If you experience any technical problems, please get in touch with your instructor, or with [Raquel Ortiz](#), and we'll work to smooth over the process as much as possible.)

How will grading be handled?

The faculty overwhelmingly adopted a change to our grading process for this semester, under which all classes will be graded on a pass/fail basis. This standard will apply to all courses, including clinics. This decision means that there will be no change in the cumulative GPA of any student based on spring grades.

Why didn't you allow students to choose grades or pass/fail?

We appreciate that there are those of you who – for various and quite legitimate reasons – would greatly prefer to receive grades for the spring semester. However, we were concerned that those

grades could also reflect, in ways that we could not predict, a number of inequitable circumstances that ultimately led us away from applying our ordinary grading policy.

The faculty is continuing to consider the potential impact of the Spring 2020 pass/fail semester on such matters as academic dismissal, probation, supervision, scholarships, and graduate honors, to name just a few. We understand that this news will not land in the same way with each of you, but I can assure you the faculty took this decision very seriously and has tried to do its best under these difficult circumstances.

What was your rationale for choosing pass/fail grading?

We looked closely at and considered: (a) what other schools are doing; (b) the results of the survey instrument Dean Yelnosky sent to students last weekend; and (c) other messages received from students by members of the faculty. The faculty engaged in vigorous discussions via email. A brief summary will undoubtedly not capture all the nuances, but broadly, the following factors played a role:

- **Equity.** Not all of our students are similarly situated in their ability to transition successfully to online learning. Much of this inequity is caused by circumstances beyond their control (such as economic, health, family, housing, and other challenges). Since we first began to take steps to respond to the pandemic, the physical and mental health of all of our students has been our first priority, and we recognized that layering these new challenges on top of the ordinary pressure associated with the end of a law school semester and the grading of final exams was unfair and potentially inhumane.
- **COVID-19 Circumstances.** We also considered the possibility that faculty or staff may themselves become ill or need to care for ill family members in late April or May, and we tried to make a plan that would allow us to ensure that students could be evaluated at the end of the term even if there were faculty or staff unable to complete the ordinary grading process.
- **Student Preferences.** A supermajority of the 400 responses to our student survey (70%) answered “Yes” to the question of whether they preferred some alternative to the ordinary grading policy for spring 2020. The faculty discussed at length their concerns about whether a mandatory pass/fail system would not give students sufficient incentive to do their best work. However, ultimately most felt that concern was less weighty than concerns about equity and unnecessary stress and that some students may actually be able to do better work without the stress associated with our ordinary grading policy under these circumstances.
- **Best Practices.** The faculty were aware that a plurality of law schools across the country (26 at the time of their decision) had adopted a mandatory pass/fail grading system for Spring 2020. Since their decision, another 10 law schools have moved to mandatory pass/fail for this semester.

How will the graduation writing requirement be affected by this decision?

For those of you who are working in seminars or through directed research to satisfy your graduation writing requirement, the policy requiring that the paper must be of a minimum quality

to earn a C grade will still apply. Any paper that would have received at least a C will satisfy the writing requirement, and the student's transcript will display a "pass" for the seminar or directed research.

What will be the basis for determining pass/fail in a course?

The standard for passing remains the same: that is, a pass under the grading system is any grade above D-, and a fail is anything below that. There is no curve that will prohibit faculty from giving passes to all students if the work that they see merits that.

How will Law Review and Moot Court membership be determined in these circumstances?

There are conversations underway with the leadership of moot court. These talks are pretty far along and contemplate running something like a mini-moot competition for selection to moot court. However, details have not yet been finalized. Law Review will most likely do something similar, probably administering the writing competition remotely.

How will we explain this to potential employers?

Employers will understand that these are very unusual circumstances, and not unique to RWU Law. Every law school in the country has shifted to remote learning this semester. Many of them have also adopted a pass/fail system this semester, so that will not be an anomaly either. The country is going through a crisis that has affected education in a variety of ways, and having a pass/fail on your transcript will not, in all likelihood, be a significant factor. In fact, the Justice Department – which is the largest legal employer in the country – has already issued a policy that they're not going to worry about pass/fail grades on students' transcripts this semester. It is probable that most employers will take a similar position. Your transcript will be annotated to explain that all grades were mandatory pass/fail for the semester in response to the pandemic.

How will the pass/fail decision impact 1Ls hoping to matriculate into the Honors Program?

This is still under discussion.

How will the pass/fail decision be affected by ABA rules requiring a certain number of letter grades?

The ABA has made it clear to RWU Law and to all American law schools that they are willing to waive many of their regulatory requirements under the present circumstances. RWU Law has also lifted its own limitation on pass-fail grades to accommodate the situation.

I need special accommodations for my final exams. How should I proceed?

Requests for academic accommodations are still being received. Typically, there is a 30-day deadline for accommodation requests; however, we are attempting to be as liberal and flexible as

possible. If you have not yet reached out, please contact [Dean Lalli](#) as soon as possible. Students who have already been granted non-standard testing accommodations will soon be receiving further information by email. The usual form that students with granted academic accommodations complete each semester as part of the exam scheduling process will not be required this semester.

Will all exams be open-book and done online at home? Will they still be three-hour exams, or are extensions possible?

Yes, all exams will be taken remotely. They will all be open-book and open-note. Time will almost certainly be extended, not just for those students who request accommodations but for any number of reasons (for example, bad Wi-Fi, using a shared computer, or other reasons). We recognize that these exams will have to be administered with compassion, and that not all students will be able to take a three-hour exam in the way they ordinarily could.

Will exams be graded or scored?

Every faculty member will decide how to administer their exams and how to grade them. Faculty members will still, of course, view final exams as an opportunity to give you feedback, in addition to the binary choice of Pass or Fail. And as with all assessments, you should be hearing from them in one way or another about where you did well and how your performance could have been better. Your professors are still here, and they still want to interact with their students.

What if I need additional academic support to make the most of online learning?

The [Academic Success office](#) is up and running, so you should continue to take advantage of its resources. If you have questions, contact [Professor Thompson](#) or [Brittany Raposa](#) by email. Also, [Professor Kishbaugh](#) is having open-door meetings to work with students around their writing. Every student has also been added to a [Bridges class](#), where the Academic Success department is sharing additional resources and tips for the transition to online learning. Be sure to take a look. Also check out [National Jurist's "Coronavirus Survival Guide"](#); a PDF version is [here](#).

I can't complete this semester and I want to take a leave of absence. Can this be arranged?

[Dean Lalli](#) and [Dean Goldstein](#) stand ready to discuss the possibility of a leave of absence, if find that you are unable to complete this semester. We are currently making modifications to the [leave of absence policy](#), which will be more favorable than it would otherwise be to students, on account of the extreme circumstances.

I am running into financial difficulties. What should I do?

RWU Law is establishing an emergency fund (more on that soon, via email) that we hope to grow over the next several weeks for students experiencing financial difficulties created by the

pandemic and by the circumstances of remote instruction. If you are in need of emergency funding, please contact [Kathryn Politano](#) or [Tina Bacon](#) in Financial Aid.

The City of Providence has compiled a useful guide “[External Resources Responding to COVID-19](#)”, which provides an overview of community-based resources and supports that are available to residents and business owners throughout Providence and Rhode Island.

Are my student groups still active?

[Dean Lalli](#) and [SBA President Kelvin Santos](#) met recently to discuss the impact of the pandemic on student groups, and how RWU Law can continue to support student groups. There will be an email communication on this soon. In the meantime, please don't hesitate if you want to plan virtual events or get-togethers.

Will there be a commencement ceremony?

No final decision has yet been reached about commencement. This delay is due largely to a reluctance among RWU Law's faculty and administration to give up on it until we absolutely have to. But whatever the outcome, we are committed to letting you know before April 13, to ensure that you and your families will have time to plan.

If commencement is cancelled, what happens then?

An in-person commencement would not be cancelled; it would, more accurately, be postponed. RWU Law is committed to having some sort of live commencement ceremony at some point in the future. Exactly when, it is too soon to predict. But in case it turns out that an in-person ceremony is delayed for any significant period of time, we are also looking into the possibility of a virtual ceremony in the interim.

Are summer classes still going to happen?

Yes. Summer registration starts on Monday, March 30, and should proceed as normally as possible under the unusual circumstances. We've updated the summer schedule and added several new courses. You can find the updated schedule [here](#). The staff of [Student Finance & Records](#) is available for any questions you may have about registration.

Will summer classes be online or in person?

A few courses are already listed on the summer schedule as being online. This means that they will be held online regardless of whether we have returned to in-person classes. It is, of course, possible that we won't have returned to in-person classes before the summer semester starts, in which case all courses listed on the summer schedule will be provided online (at least initially, until we're told it's okay to hold classes in-person again). The staff of [Student Finance & Records](#) is available for any questions you may have about registration.

Will I be able to get into the classes I need?

Summer classes have usually been held in Providence in the evening, for convenience, since a lot of students generally work there. This summer, by contrast, we may end up moving some classes back to Bristol, which will have the effect of raising the caps in those classes since we have bigger rooms in Bristol. And some courses may be offered during the day. We hope this will provide enough spots for people who want to take classes.

Will summer classes also be pass/fail?

No. At present, we anticipate that summer classes will proceed as normal, under a graded system.

Because many students have lost their internships due to the pandemic, will scholarships be extended into summer classes for full-time students?

We haven't yet come to any conclusions, but we have begun exploring how financial aid and scholarships might be worked into the increased demand for summer classes.

Where does the 2020-21 academic year stand at this point?

The draft Fall 2020 schedule is [here](#). We've also posted a draft Spring 2021 schedule, which can be found [here](#). Although it's a work in progress and bound to change, it should give you a decent idea of what courses are in store, which should assist you in making enrolment decisions. Several of the new courses have "TBA" listed for days, times, or location, but these will be updated in coming days. We also hope to add another course or two soon. Please contact [Professor Goldstein](#) if you have any questions.

How and when will my fees be refunded?

Refunds for parking will be made by direct deposit. The date upon which you can expect to see the refund remains uncertain, but it is coming. Students with money left on their dining cards or printing cards should contact [Student Finance & Records](#), and they will explain how to get a refund if you are a graduating student or how to have that money rolled over into future semesters if you are not.