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Law School News: Your Latest Town Hall FAQ 04-22-2020

Roger Williams University School of Law

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April 22, 2020

Law School News

Your Latest Town Hall FAQ

Up-to-date information about exams, grading policies, virtual commencement, summer classes and more.

April 22, 2020



- [Read FAQ #1 \(March 20\)](#)
- [Read FAQ #2 \(March 30\)](#)
- [Read FAQ for 3Ls \(April 7\)](#)
- [Read FAQ for 1Ls \(April 16\)](#)

The Fall Semester

- What are RWU Law's plans for the Fall 2020 semester?

There has been some press coverage of universities that are contingency planning for the fall, based on the possibility that they may not be able to bring people back to campus. We too are engaged in contingency planning. There are lots of possibilities, but as of now we are not on any timeline. We haven't set a date when we're going to tell you for sure what the fall semester will look like. We realize that we don't have endless time to make this decision, but we do have three

months until what is really our first in-person event for the next academic year – which is Jump Start, scheduled to start on August 3.

I can assure you that our great new dean, [Greg Bowman](#), is involved in conversations about making the transition to Fall 2020. He formally becomes the dean on July 1, but he's already been in touch with me and several other members of the staff to talk about how to make that transition as smooth as possible.

- Will Dean Yelnosky be teaching any classes this fall?

Michael gets a well-deserved semester-long sabbatical after completing his deanship on June 30. His term as dean has been very eventful in many ways – ending with this nonstop emergency management that we've all been in since March! So, we'll have another professor teaching his classes this fall, but Michael will be teaching torts again in Spring 2021.

- Will Pass/Fail be an option for classes in the fall?

No, our policies generally don't allow students to choose pass-fail as an option. Classes are graded, with just a handful of exceptions.

- Is there any chance of lowering tuition costs for the fall semester if we are still in remote-learning mode?

If we were to continue another semester of full online instruction, we would certainly be talking about our fee structure. But again, so far, we haven't made a decision about any of that.

Commencement

- What will the "virtual Commencement" be like?

It's an online event that will take place on May 15, in celebration of the Class of 2020. People have been asking us questions like, "Is this going to be the Commencement we would have had if we were there in person, but just sort of on video and through the screen?"

The answer to that is no. Think of this more as a sort of mashup of Glen Manor and Commencement – or maybe what happens at a Commencement off on the side, when you come back into the building or chat out on the lawn.

The beginning of this virtual celebration will be live, and then we'll transition to a recorded event. There will be some aspects of this celebration that look like Commencement – there'll be a roll call, for example. Our honorary degree recipients will be honored, and our Commencement speaker Margaret Marshall will give a short address – but it won't be her formal Commencement address. There will be some taped congratulations from faculty and staff, and maybe a special guest will give a short message. Voting for a professor of the year, adjunct faculty member of the

year, and staff member of the year is complete, and so those people will also be recognized during the celebration.

- How will we get our diplomas?

Diplomas will be mailed. We will be sending graduates a link to a web form to make sure we have your updated addresses. Then you will receive a diploma in the mail at the address you provide. If you do not respond, your diploma will be mailed to the address that [Doug Peterson and his staff](#) have on file for you. (You can also check the address we have on record at RogerCENTRAL at the bottom of the left-hand menu, under User Options.)

- Will graduating students receive a PDF version of the Commencement program to share with family and friends?

Graduates will receive a sharable link to a “flipbook” version of the program.

- Will graduating students receive a link for the virtual 3L celebration to share with family and friends?

Yes, a link will be available for you on the website’s Commencement page to share with your families and friends.

- The bookstore emailed us saying we can return our regalia for a refund. Will there ever really be an in-person Commencement event?

Yes, down the road we are going to have an in-person Commencement – and that’s when you’ll get the long and boring parts! For the virtual celebration, we’ve taken out all the long speeches. But no, the bookstore’s refund offer does not mean that we won’t have an in-person Commencement. It’s just that some people will want to get their money back in the short term, and then purchase or rent the regalia again for the in-person event.

- Will the law school be participating in the University’s August Commencement event?

No. The University is planning to have their Commencement for the undergraduate Class of 2020 in August, around the time that the new academic year begins. For reasons that are obvious to all of you who are thinking about September bar exams, we will not be participating in that August event. We will make separate plans for RWU Law’s in-person Commencement.

- In consideration of the new dean taking over in July, will Dean Yelnosky still be able to serve as acting dean for current 3Ls at any future in-person Commencement?

This is not something that’s been discussed to date, but if Dean Bowman is up for it, Dean Yelnosky certainly would be as well. So, we will figure that out a bit later.

Final Exams

- What's the latest on exams?

The [exam schedule](#) has been posted. Your exam will be available for download within a certain timeframe – normally 24 hours, though it may be more depending on the faculty member. In the schedule, you'll see a start date and a start time, which is when you can begin the download for your exam. The figure in the "Hours" column is how long you will have to do that exam. So, for example, if you start your download at 9:00 a.m. on May 1, and it's a five-hour exam, your five hours start at the moment of the download – and then you will then have to upload the completed exam by 2:00 p.m. that day.

To be clear, you will not be using the Examplify software at all this cycle; that is for in-class exams. What you download will be in PDF form, and you can save it as you wish. You're free to print it, so you can look at it in that way, and then you have the five hours to or four hours – whatever it is for your particular exam – to upload your completed exam. There is no test-taking software that takes over your computer – it's just you downloading a file off the website, so your computer will not be locked. (Again, the only thing that locks your computer is the software that we use for in-house exams, which will not be used this year.)

- What do we need to know about the test-taking itself?

In the schedule, you'll see that it specifies ExamSoft or Bridges. We've sent out instructions for the take-homes and will do so again the day before your exam starts.

- **ExamSoft.** Please review the [ExamSoft instructions](#) we emailed and posted for more information. Make sure you read those instructions. And if you have any issues whatsoever, do not contact the professor. Contact the [Registrar's Office](#) if the issue involves an ExamSoft exam.
- **Bridges.** You could also have a [Bridges](#) exam provided to you by the faculty member – also within the timeframes presented on the exam schedule. If you have any issues whatsoever with Bridges, a similar rule applies. Do not contact the professor; you should contact [Instructional Design](#) for a Bridges exam. One tip: generally, if there's an essay question, you can type your answer in MS Word and then copy-paste it into the text box in Bridges, so that Bridges won't accidentally delete your answers, etc.

Make sure you complete your exam exactly on schedule. If you need to reschedule, the usual rules apply – if you have two exams within a 24-hour period, we can reschedule one of those for you. Please contact the [Student Finance and Records Office](#) if that is your situation.

If you have a conflict that may require more than 24 hours, then you will need to reach out to [Dean Goldstein](#). That would include any personal, family, or other obligations that prevent you from being able to take an exam during its scheduled time. If you need exam accommodations, you should get in touch with [Dean Lalli](#).

- Am I free to take my exam at the very end of the 24-hour window?

Please understand that the 24-hour window is your total available time to take the exam. So even if you start your five-hour exam toward the end of that period, it still can't extend past that 24-hour deadline. You will need to have completed and uploaded your completed exam by the end of this 24 hours. Whenever you may plan to sit down and actually take the exam, it needs to be finished by the end of that 24-hour period.

- What if I run into difficulties in downloading or uploading my exam?

Make sure you contact us immediately about any downloading problems, as noted above. When it comes time to uploading your completed exam, if for some reason you cannot upload it, make sure you *email us your completed exam* within the timeframe allotted. Do that immediately, and then we can talk later about whatever happened with the upload. At that point, the technicalities don't really matter – so long as we got the exam within the time needed.

- What happens if I download the exam and have technical issues that take time away from starting or completing the exam?

In such a case, contact [Doug Peterson](#) and tell him what's going on. Doug will confer with Dean Goldstein on what to do for any particular student and their particular exam. We'll work with you to make sure that everyone is treated fairly. We're not trying to be sticklers about deadlines. We'll do everything we can to make sure that you get the help you need.

- One of our professors told us that we would be given five hours to complete an exam with three hours of content – but the schedule does not reflect this.

We asked the professors to give extra time, so that number you see on the schedule already reflects that extra time. If there's a certain class that you have a question about, just [reach out to us](#).

- Do 3Ls with special accommodations receive time-and-a-half, compared to students who have normal accommodations?

All students who have been granted accommodations will receive a memo from [Jill](#) with the information for your specific exams. But in general, yes, we will be granting time-and-a-half accommodations based on the standard length of the exams this semester.

- How do we find out what our anonymous exam-taking number is?

We'll be sending those out several times before the exam period starts, and after that we'll send it at the beginning of each week. But if you miss any of those emails, you can feel free to [contact us](#).

Grading Policy

- Can you further explain the Pass/Fail grading system?

We've received a number of questions from students who are understandably anxious about what the pass/fail grading system means. One worry that we've heard is that there will be a high bar to earning a passing grade. Some students have also heard a rumor that professors must give a certain number of students a failing grade in each class.

Let us set your minds at ease on this topic. Under the policy adopted by the faculty, a grade of "Pass" is equivalent to any grade of D- or higher under the graded system. A "Fail" is equivalent to an "F" under the graded system.

We do not have a definition of an "F" in our handbook, but in my experience, and from talking to my colleagues, a grade of "F" is given only when a student's performance is so far below expectations that the student has not shown even a basic understanding of the key doctrines or skills covered a course. Very, very few grades of "F" are given in a typical semester, and we have no reason to think that more will be given under the unique and stressful circumstances of this semester.

But to be perfectly clear: *no professor is required to give any Fs in any course.*

- Doesn't that set the bar too low?

Although we are not giving letter grades this semester, we still care very deeply that you work hard to learn the material covered in your courses and master the doctrines and skills that we are teaching. That is what you are enrolled in law school to do. It is crucial to your development as lawyers to continue honing your skills and knowledge of the law.

You will need to know this material in order to pass the bar, serve your clients, and accomplish all the great things that our graduates go on to do. The only thing that has changed this semester is that you will not receive a letter grade that reflects, in some small way, your professors' evaluation of the *degree* of your mastery of these skills and doctrines, as measured on exams and other assessments. Of course, the additional incentive that grades offer isn't present this semester – but that's no reason not to learn the law that you're supposed to learn.

- Will there be a note, or some type of acknowledgement, attached to rankings, since for 1Ls those rankings will only be based on one semester of law school?

It's doubtful whether there'll be a notation on the ranking, since there is no particular document in which all students are ranked. However, there will be a notation on everyone's transcript explaining why this semester was Pass/Fail.

- When are class rankings usually released?

Usually in mid-June.

- How will course evaluations be done this year?

Course evaluations are going out electronically this year. Usually we distribute paper evaluations at the end of class but, of course, this year we couldn't do that. So [Jill Dallaire](#) will be sending those forms out soon.

We want you to tell us your candid thoughts about how this semester went, just as always. But we have the added one additional question about online learning. We want to know how online teaching went, because this isn't going to be the last time that we teach online – for instance, this summer we'll continue online teaching, because we don't have a choice! And hopefully, we'll soon be offering online classes because we *want* to and not just because we *have* to. So, we want to see what we can do to improve the way that we're delivering. Because, for most of us who are now teaching online, it's a new thing. We just started doing it suddenly with the COVID-19 situation, without a lot of planning. So, now we want to know how to make it better.

- What's the latest on academic standing?

Usually, we have a rule that students need a 2.0 GPA or better at the end of the year in order to advance to the next year. But that rule has been suspended, or at least revised, for this year. Any decisions about academic dismissals are being deferred until after the Fall 2020 semester. Students will need a 2.0 GPA after that semester to avoid academic dismissal, and their GPA at that time will include all courses taken up to that point.

Students who are on academic probation or supervision should be getting an email from [Dean Goldstein](#) or from [Dean Lalli](#), covering how you'll be evaluated and what the probation and supervision program will look like this fall into summer, and what requirements you may need to complete your 2L year.

- Won't students on academic probation suffer because of Pass/Fail?

Our hearts go out to some of the students on academic probation who lost this semester as a chance to improve their GPA. But they do now have the summer and the fall to take more classes and improve their grades. And there won't be the consequence that usually happens when a student drops below 2.0; that is, they won't be academically dismissed.

Our probation program isn't designed in any way to be punitive. We're simply trying to support all of our students and make sure that they have the tools to succeed in law school, and then to pass the bar. It's really a program of trying to offer all the resources we can to those students who face (or at least started law school facing) some challenges. We're still here to try to help you succeed in every way that we can, notwithstanding the fact that that one semester was ungraded.

- What's the latest on grading into the Honors Program?

The Scholarship Committee is meeting soon to figure out how we'll be evaluating students for the Honors Program and also for retaining scholarships.

Summer Classes

- What's the latest on summer registration?

Registration is still open. If you have any issues seeing what courses are available, go to [RogerCENTRAL](#) and click on the [course catalog](#), and you can search for “Law Summer 2020.” That will bring you every offering that we have, including seminars, doctrinal courses, whatever. You'll see all those on that one page, where you can write them in your plan, the particular section, and then go to Student Planning to register that section. You should definitely check out the wonderful seminars we're offering this summer.

If you have any issues whatsoever in terms of registration, please [contact us](#) immediately. Payment for summer tuition is due May 22. You must have a minimum of five credits to borrow, and you can contact [Financial Aid](#) with any questions about that.

- How will we get our summer textbooks? Will the bookstore be sending to them by mail?

Yes, you can order books through the bookstore and they'll be delivered to your home address. In-person pickup will not be available.

- When will the summer class books selections be posted it that?

We'll email students when the summer course selections are posted.

- How will this affect books for veteran students, since there is a third party involved?

It's unlikely that this will change anything. But we'll check into it.

- Are RWU Law's summer classes all ABA-approved?

Yes, all our offerings are ABA-approved. This semester, on an emergency basis, we had to shift to our online presentation for a portion of the class. The ABA requires faculty approval before a course can be offered online, and the faculty has approved all our summer classes to be online.

- The ABA ordinarily approves an individual for up to 15 credits for online courses during law school. After this semester, won't that limit be maxed out for most of us?

For all intents and purposes, this semester is exempt. The ABA has written advice memos to deans and associate deans, and they understand that every law school in that country had to do what we did. I'm guessing also that if a school were to have gone Pass/Fail going forward – let's say in the summer – they would have done the same thing. But we are on very solid ground in terms of the number of Pass/Fail distance courses that our students are going to take. So the 15-

credit rule has been waived for the spring semester and will likely be waived for the summer session. Fall will be a different situation -- but right now you can be completely comfortable that you'll be getting an education that is ABA-approved.

- What will the attendance policy be for online summer classes?

Our policy is unchanged: students can't miss more than 20 percent of their classes. That is the case for online courses as well. Faculty can take attendance, at least in synchronous online classes (which are most of our online classes) by downloading who participates.

The ABA also has an attendance requirement. If the advent of online education were to change the ABA's mind about attendance, it might have some influence on our internal policy as well, but that's not something we expect to see change anytime soon.

Of course, with all the chaos that's around us because of this pandemic and its ramifications – or if there are other personal conflicts that students have that are separate from the pandemic – our Academic Standards Committee would take those facts into account. Where students have good reasons to have missed classes, the committee can exempt them from the attendance policy rules.

- How exactly will summer stipends work?

The program is still proceeding, and the committee is reviewing current applications. We should have answers soon. The next deadline is April 24. If any stipend recipient's internship is negatively impacted or canceled, they should reach out to [Veronica Paricio](#), and she will work with them privately.

- Will the scholarship committee continue to discuss scholarships for summer?
These are extraordinary circumstances and the six-semester limit on scholarship usage should be reconsidered.

This is a conversation that we've had and, reluctantly, we came to the conclusion that we couldn't offer an exception to the "no scholarships in the summer for full-time students" rule. We know this is disappointing – it was disappointing to us as well – but it's a decision we felt we had to make.

- But many students will be even more financially compromised this summer.
Asking them to take out more debt while just to stay busy during the summer can create hardships.

We do understand this. Keep in mind, however, that we generally charge students tuition based on the semester – it's a flat semester charge, regardless of how many credits a student takes. However, there is an exception for students who go under 12 credits – it then converts to a per credit charge, which is less than the full semester charge. So if it turns out you're taking additional courses this summer that you wouldn't otherwise have been taking – and incurring that extra expense, which you will – it is possible to capture some of that on the back end, let's

say as a spring semester 3L, by making sure that you don't have 12 credits or more to complete during that last semester.

Other Matters

- Are scholarships going to be reevaluated for a possible increase for next year?

The Scholarship Committee will be meeting soon to figure out what we're going to do about scholarship retention. Usually, these are requests for additional scholarship amounts – or requests to not lose present scholarships – that are made after the spring semester. We're first going to have to figure out what we can do about these matters for this unique semester.

- What is the University doing about meal and parking refunds?

We are in the process of reaching out to the handful of law students who are on meal plans, and will talk to them more specifically about what they're going to get and when they're going to get it. There *will* be a parking refund or credit, depending upon your class year. There are law school points that some of you have on your cards. If you are graduating, those points have already been refunded to you. If you are a 1L or 2L, they will be credited. Again: as a general matter, refunds are going to graduating students, whereas incumbent students will be getting credits.

- What's happening with the emergency fund?

We did establish an [emergency fund](#) for students who have been adversely affected financially by the COVID-19 pandemic. We've posted it on our Facebook groups, [Ralph Tavares](#) sent an email, and will send another round of emails soon. We are now past the formal deadline for applications, but if you have a need, please apply anyway. We'll help if we can! The turnaround time for processing applications is still a little slow, but – as you can imagine – the need is high and there's a lot to sift through. Many thanks to the law school, the SBA, AccessLex, and a whole lot of loving faculty members, administrators, staff, and students who donated to the fund.

- To which office at RWU Law should we send the law certificate form for our bar applications?

[Student Finance and Records.](#)

- Will these virtual Town Hall Meetings continue during the summer?

This is a good way for us to communicate with you all. And if it remains the only way we can communicate, we'll continue to do it to the extent you and/or we feel like we need to keep the communication lines open. (Some have suggested that we continue even after the pandemic is over.) We haven't yet talked about whether we'll do this during the exam period, but if you have thoughts about that that you would like to share you can [email Dean Yelnosky](#).

* * * * *

CONCLUSION: Dean Michael J. Yelnosky

I know that you, as students, are under a tremendous amount of stress right now. But you've been spectacular during this crisis, and I have just never been – and I've said this to the staff as well – I've never been prouder to be associated with this institution than I am right now. So let's keep the communication lines open, and that will help set us on the best course to continue working and moving through this together.

Those of you who are not graduating are a testament to how valuable these "virtual town hall meetings" can be as well. Even after we return to the building, we should probably continue doing this, so that people do not have to be in the building at a particular time in order to engage in this conversation. So, there is some silver lining – and I look forward to a time when the communication lines are easier to keep open, via this vehicle and others.

Good luck on your exams.