Law School News: Fall 2020 Reopening: The FAQ 07-09-2020

Roger Williams University School of Law

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RWU Law's twin goals for Fall 2020 are (1) to keep you safe, and (2) to give you the best-quality legal education we can possibly deliver. Now let's dig into the details.

How do you feel about leading the law school into the 2020-21 academic year?

We’re going to have a seamless transition into next year, which I think is in the best interest of the law school and certainly you as the students. I’ve been pretty actively engaged since commencement, working with and getting to know my colleagues on the faculty and staff, and it’s clear to me that we have a really committed group of folks.

What are your guiding principles for the reopening?
One of the many things I find wonderfully meaningful about teaching law is that we’re training our future colleagues – getting to know you, supporting you, watching you excel and then go out into the world and make a difference. Law schools exist for their students. Our purpose is to serve, teach, and train you so that you can become the lawyers and leaders of the future.

This year, as you well know, we have an extra set of challenges. No one, back in January or February, would have anticipated a Fall Semester like this one, but here we are. And we have been hard at work over the summer; many people – from across campus, at the University level, at the School of Law level – being very proactive, very innovative. There’s been a lot of involvement from people in Facilities, a lot of leadership from experts in public health, and we’re coming up with a good plan for reopening the University in the Fall Semester.

We’ve had conversations with the Rhode Island Department of Health, we’ve been following CDC guidance, and we’ve come up with some plans that we think will provide you with the education you need and deserve – whether you are attending in person, online or via combination thereof.

Our goals and our focus are to keep you safe, to support and strengthen our sense of community at the School of Law, and to provide you again with the quality educational experience that you deserve, so that you will be fully career-ready in just a few semesters, when you graduate. Your education is paramount. Your safety is paramount. We are committed to both.

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FALL 2020:  **Associate Dean Jared Goldstein**

Let me begin by reiterating what Greg said: our goals in our planning for Fall – which, it’s not an exaggeration to say, we’ve been working on night and day – are (1) to keep everyone safe, and (2) to fulfill our mission of training the next generation of lawyers, who are going to go out and do the work of justice.

Have changes been made to the Fall 2020 academic calendar?

We have made some changes. They were detailed in a recent email I sent to you all. Broadly, in order to complete all of our classes before Thanksgiving, we’re eliminating the fall holidays and moving up the first day of class from Wednesday, August 19, to Monday, August 17th. Some classes will be in person, some will be online, and some will be a hybrid of both. Some faculty, as you can imagine, have some COVID-related reasons for teaching remotely, and it’s the same for some students. So we want to make sure that you all know you have an option. If you have a COVID-related reason to be remote, then you can take all of your classes remotely.

What is the deadline for requesting all-online classes?

I have extended the deadline for upper-level students to July 15, and all requests will be granted. We’re not asking for documentation, as we trust our students to do what’s right for them. So if you need to make a request to take your classes remotely, please send in the request by next
Wednesday, July 15, so that we can make our plans for fall. If you have some reason why you need more time, let me know and we’ll try to be flexible about that.

If I don’t select the all-online option, can I still take online classes?

Yes. And the reverse is also true: students who are remote will be able to take in-person classes. For that, get in touch with Dean Lalli and me and we’ll work out an accommodation to make that happen.

Can I opt to take all my classes in person?

Not all classes are going to be offered in person. That is, many of the classes that you’re likely registered for right now are going to be only offered online. On the other hand, I suppose it might be possible for a student who only wants in-person classes to change their schedule to avoid all online classes, if you do it carefully.

How will online classes this fall be different from the online classes this spring?

When we went online this spring, it was an emergency. The faculty had one week of training to start delivering classes online. Most of us had never done it before, and we did the best that we could. This summer, however, the faculty is getting much more extensive training to deliver according to best practices for online courses. In a word, we’re getting better at it and I have every hope that the online classes will be just as rigorous, and provide just as much training, as in-person classes. That said, I also recognize that in-person classes don’t necessarily work with every student’s learning style.

What if I opt for in-person classes but later develop symptoms?

We understand that students taking in-person classes may find themselves needing to quarantine, or missing classes due to illness. If so, we’ll make arrangements, either through a class that’s broadcast to you live or through a recorded class. We’ll arrange for an alternate means of attendance. Get in touch with me, or with Dean Lalli.

What is the law school’s procedure if an in-person student tests positive for COVID?

First, the student who tests positive will go into quarantine. Then there will be an aggressive testing and contact-tracing practice where we work both with University Health Services and campus resources, as well as with the Rhode Island Department of Health. Knowing close contacts, both within the building and externally, will be very important as we can try to mitigate any spread.

Do online-only students need to get tested periodically for COVID?

No. They may want to get tested, but not based on any the requirement from the University. If you come to campus, however, you should be tested.
If I choose online-only, can I still attend classes on campus occasionally if I feel comfortable?

If any students who opt for online-only due to health circumstances change their minds and want to come to campus, we can work to accommodate them on a case-by-case basis, and figure out whether it makes sense for them to attend classes in person under some circumstances. I wouldn’t rule it out. I would just say, get in touch with me or Dean Lalli, and we’ll see if it makes sense.

That said, there will be circumstances where it’s not safe for a student, say with a preexisting health condition, to be in a classroom with 50 other students. That doesn’t mean, however, that you can’t take advantage of in-person meetings with different offices, or with Academic Success, where it’s on a one-on-one basis. Students who elect to be remote for non-health reasons – due to, say, lack of childcare or other complicating circumstances – will still be allowed in the building.

What happens if we experience a second wave of the virus and there is another mandated shutdown?

This is something that we have given a lot of thought to. Every faculty member is required to have not only a plan for how they’ll deliver their classes if everything goes well, but also a contingency plan for moving their classes to remote if we need to, so that they’re not scrambling the way that we were in March. So of course we hope that the Fall Semester goes as planned – but the world is full of surprises. So if it turns out that we need to go remote again with class, we’ll do that, and we’ll do it better and more smoothly than last time. Our goal, now as in March, will be to keep everybody safe while still fulfilling our mission of training you to be the excellent lawyers that you’re going to be.

What if state-mandated social distancing rules are relaxed before Thanksgiving? Will RWU Law’s rules relax as well?

The answer right now is, “We don’t know.” But we will certainly address that eventuality if it comes to pass. The situation may change, and we’ll have to be nimble. But any response at the School of Law will also be carried out in collaboration with the University and the Rhode Island Department of Health.

Can you give us more details regarding the administration of COVID testing and whether payment for COVID testing will be made by the students or by the school?

That’s a “stay-tuned.” There’s going to be more news soon. The University’s very hard at work on that. However, this may be a good time to remind students that we have a mandatory health insurance policy. You must either show proof of insurance or carry the school’s health insurance, which is offered at a very competitive rate. Obviously, with the current pandemic, it’s just going to be really important that students have access to high-quality health services. So please make sure you have health insurance. University Health Services will be handling symptomatic testing but will need insurance information. They are not routinely open to law students. Law students
who would like to access Health Services can opt-in for a fee. I’ll put together an email with that information, but for now, please make sure that you review your coverage.

Will students who elect to take all classes remotely in the fall be subject to any adverse impacts regarding bar eligibility?

No. We’re an ABA-accredited law school, and so our graduates will be eligible to take the bar regardless of how their classes are delivered. In fact, the ABA is modifying its rules to allow some additional latitude for online education. Everything we do at RWU Law is going to be totally compliant with what the ABA requires and expects. Also, where a jurisdiction only allows for a certain number of online credits, those jurisdictions are now allowing waivers for law schools because of the pandemic.

When will the new class schedule be released?
The schedule was released on Monday, July 6. It’s been circulated to the faculty and staff and they’ve made adjustments to make sure that it works. The schedule indicates which classes will be offered in person, and which will be offered online.

Will my class schedule be different?
Many if not most classes are keeping the same days and times, but for some these may have changed – and, in some cases, the method of delivery as well; that is, whether they’re online or in-person. So you should review your schedule of classes very carefully.

We’ve had to adjust the schedule in many ways to make Fall 2020 work, in part because we needed time between classes so that we wouldn’t have congestion in the hallways. And we had to stagger the times when classes were offered, to make sure that students in required classes won’t have to remain in the building for hours between classes, because that wouldn’t be safe.

Will we have to re-register? I already have set classes that I chose based on my schedule.

No, all students will still be registered for all the classes that they registered for this past spring. However, you might want to change some of those classes – because maybe they’re now offered at a time when you don’t want to take a class, or maybe they’re going to be delivered by a method you don’t want. Or you may find yourself registered for two classes that now have a time conflict.

In such cases, you may need to adjust your schedule to make it work. But if your schedule works without any changes, and you’re happy with it, then it’s still yours.

What if I can’t figure out how to make my schedule work?

You should get in touch with Dean Lalli or for myself to work through any individual questions you have about the schedule. In general, you won’t be able to change the schedule immediately, because we don’t want a free-for-all, with everyone scrambling to move out of one class or into
another. But we’ll have an orderly process through which students can adjust their registration, and we’ll let you know how that process is going to work. We’ll also be working closely with all 3L’s to make sure they can meet their graduation requirements.

How many credits should we take?

Full-time students should plan to register for 12 to 16 credits as usual. However, you can ask for an overload or an under-load through my office, as per our usual procedures.

Will there be changes to the attendance policy?

The faculty is revisiting the attendance policy to protect the health of our community. We want to make sure that students who feel sick in any way can stay at home, without fearing that they need to come to class because of our attendance policy. There will be ways for students who can’t attend in person to have their viewing of the class, whether it’s live or recorded, count as attendance.

How will exams be administered?

All exams will be remote. Faculty will provide specific information about the timing and length of their exams. Some may give a 24-hour window to take an exam. Others may give a traditional three- or four-hour exam that’s scheduled at a set time. If students have conflicts with that time, they can ask to reschedule their exam, just as they always have. We’re looking into remote proctoring for exams, but we haven’t made any final decision about that.

How will grading policies change?

Just like this summer, all courses are under our grading policy and letter grades will be given as usual this fall.

What safety policies will be in place in the building this fall?

All students will need to undergo symptomatic or clearance testing; that is, getting a negative COVID test before returning to campus. Community members who have any symptoms will not be permitted in the building. We’ll be providing you with more information about that and what it means. But we want to make sure that we’re keeping all members of our community safe. In the building, we’ll be practicing social distancing. We’ll always need to maintain six-foot social distances in the building. In some places, plexiglass will have been put up to maintain distance with people working in the building. We’ll also be making various adjustments to the classrooms. We’ve marked out where students can sit in a classroom in order to maintain social distancing.

How will that play out in practice?

Well, a classroom that would hold, say, 100 people, like Room 262, can now hold at most 31 people. Room 283, the big courtroom that holds 200 people, can now, with social distancing,
hold exactly 59. There’ll be sanitizing stations in all classrooms, and throughout the building. There’ll be signs up about the safety protocols, and there’ll be directional arrows indicating a one-way route around the second floor of the building. We’ll be making other adjustments throughout the building – including in the library, in the hallways, and in the bistro.

Will masks be required as well?

Yes, masks will be required at all times in the building. I know it’s going to seem really weird at first to see people in class like that. And faculty will be teaching like that – I think we’ll have microphones so that you can hear us, and we’re not just muffled. But we’ll all get used to it. It’ll all seem normal soon enough.

Are face shields just as adequate face masks?

The CDC’s answer is no. Face shields are considered by the CDC to protect the wearer, but not other people, whereas a face mask certainly protects other people, and ideally protects both. So unfortunately, face shields are not considered as substitutes for masks.

What will happen if someone doesn't wear a mask? How will this be policed? Will violation of social distancing be an Honor Board violation?

The rules of social distancing are University and School of Law rules, so yes, failure to follow a law school rule could be an Honor Code violation. But I think this should be more a question of, "How do we want to enforce standards? Do we do it through law, or through culture?" My own hope is that, generally, these rules – social distancing and mask wearing and all of these other policies – will be enforced as social norms.

I will tell you this – there will be extra masks in my classrooms. So if a student comes to my class not wearing a mask, I’ll tell them to wear a mask. And if the student refuses, they will have to leave – just like if they started smoking in class. They would not be allowed to do that. It’s just against the rules.

What will be the policy for the library and study rooms?

As with all the other areas in the law school, there will be different seating patterns so that we can achieve social distancing. So there will be fewer seats in the library. The study rooms, unfortunately, are all too small to allow for appropriate social distancing, so they will have to be closed for this semester.

Will printing still be available in the library?

Yes.

Will the library still be open on weekends?
Our hope is to be open on weekends and evenings as usual. If we have to make any adjustments, it will probably be due to lack of staffing. Other than that, we expect business as usual as regards hours and services.

What is the policy for the third floor?

The same policies that apply throughout the building will apply up there. Students who work on the third floor can continue to do so, but the policy will be only one person in a cubicle at a time. They have usually been assigned to two students at a time, but that wouldn’t be consistent with social distancing. The conference rooms can also be used to the extent that social distancing is possible.

Will the bistro be open?

Yes. They’re modifying their seating and services to be consistent with social distancing and safety protocols, but there will be food available in the bistro. It will certainly look different – they’re looking at more grab-and-go type options and making significant changes to the main campus dining hall as well. But they will be open.

Is there going to be a policy about bathroom use between classes? There’s always a long line.

Social distancing rules will apply throughout the building, and we don’t want any crowding in the hallways or in the bathrooms. Hash marks and tape six feet apart have become somewhat normative, so you can expect to see those in places where we think that there might be lines.

Beyond that, this just has to become part of RWU Law culture and University culture. I mean, we’re not going to be hiring a bathroom attendant to make sure that people maintain social distancing, but we do expect everyone to stay safe and try to keep each other safe. We’re all in this together, we have to protect each other. And this is just going to be part of it.

What will be different at the Providence campus?

Just as in Bristol, social distancing will be required. The room capacities are smaller there, but we have many classes scheduled in Providence; in fact, almost all of our evening classes are there.

How many students per class will be able to remain in-person as opposed to the percentage of students who will need to take classes online due to limited class space?

No one will have to take a class online due to limited space. Let me explain. For example, I’m teaching Con Law this fall. I have 100 students enrolled in my class, and of course we don’t have any rooms that can hold a 100 people anymore, given the pandemic. But we do have a room that can hold 50. So I’ll be providing a lecture online every week for the class, an asynchronous recorded lecture that will have some exercises and quizzes built in. So everybody in the class will have that one online component.
Then I’ll meet with one half of the class at a time. So there’ll be one in-person class where I’ll meet with students and we’ll go over exercises and problems. I’ll meet with half of them, say, on Monday, and the other half on Wednesday. Also, my TAs will also be available for additional sessions to go over exercises and work through problems and answer questions. So everybody in that class stays in the class, but we divide it in half so that we can meet safely in person.

And keep in mind, this is just one hybrid strategy that faculty will be employing for this situation. Others will have a slightly different approach. In addition, the University is installing cameras and microphones in every classroom, so that we can broadcast every class live to students remotely or record the class for students who aren’t there. The faculty will be doing all we can to make this work, and I think that it’ll work very well. I’m actually excited – I suspect that this online component is something that I’ll probably keep using even after the pandemic is over, as a way of delivering material so that we don’t have to spend a lot of class time going through the facts.

If we choose online classes and are enrolled in an in-person class, how will the Socratic method work? Will remote students be subject to any type of alternative Socratic method?

That’s a question that each member of the faculty is going to have to figure out for themselves – how do you get students who aren’t physically present to participate fully in a class? Every faculty member will have their own method, and how they do it is up to them – but doing it is absolutely required and expected.

We also expect every student to be able to participate fully in class, whether they’re in person or remote. This may work differently in different classes. Like for instance, again, in my Con Law class, because it’s such a large class I may have 10 remote students – so I’ll set up a separate session for them where we can talk. But in a class where only one or two students are remote, the faculty member will have to figure out how to incorporate them into the class. And it may vary. There’s not going to be a one-size-fits-all answer to that question.

Will classrooms be sanitized between classes?

Yes, the University has a cleaning protocol between every class. There will be disinfectant in the classroom and there will be a hosted protocol for how students and faculty need to clean their areas at the end of every class. My understanding is that people will have the same seating each day – you won’t be in different places, in different classes, in that room.

How will faculty meetings be conducted?

Faculty office hours will still be available to students, whether they’re in person or remote. We’re here. Our doors – whether actual or virtual – will be open to all students. We want to meet with you and find out how you’re doing, field any questions you may have, and work together to ensure that you succeed. This kind of support is probably even more important for students who are remote.
Is there any talk yet about Spring 2021? Will it look the same as Fall 2020? I'm asking because of leases: it will be hard to find a lease in Rhode Island starting January 2021.

There’s a lot of talk about spring, but there’s still a lot of uncertainty. We don’t know what will be happening with the pandemic. We don’t know what the situation will be. I will say for students who are going to be remote only this fall, I expect that we will be able to find ways for you to be remote in the spring. So you don’t have to move to Rhode Island for four months, because that doesn’t make sense, even if everything is otherwise back to what used to be normal.

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STUDENT EXPERIENCE:  Assistant Dean Lorraine Lalli

We recognize that, certainly, classes are at the core of your education. But there are also many support offices to help you in your work, and lots of student organizations and activities. So we want to give you an idea of what these aspects of RWU Law will be like in the fall.

Will all School of Law offices be open this fall?

Yes, RWU Law offices are committed to being open this fall, both in person and virtually. We’ve gotten really good at working remotely, though there are pros and cons. And we recognize that, while it’s nice to see students face-to-face, there is tremendous convenience in being available to meet students online as well. So we’ll be looking to have in-person and online appointments through our offices, including Student Services, Student Finance and Records, and Academic Success. In person meetings will be subject to social distancing guidelines in all instances, however, and virtual meetings will be encouraged.

How will your offices function online?

Academic Success, for example, is retooling to be well-prepared for offering support, not just for students who are on probation or supervision, but for all students seeking advice on how to transition to an online platform or how to succeed in a hybrid course. There will be more information to come about that programming soon.

Will student groups also be online?

Student organizations will still be functioning, subject to the same social distancing rules that we have for classes. So if there’s a room available that holds a capacity that complies with social distancing, there can be in-person meetings. We also have the ability in our classrooms to host an event that’s both online and in-person. We’ll be sharing information about all the opportunities and all the possibilities with the student organization leaders, so they can decide how best to design their programming. I am meeting with the SBA leadership this week and then branching out to all student organizations to make sure that they have the support they need to re-envision what their programming will look like in the Fall Semester.
What sort of programming do you mean?

The online platform will allow speakers from throughout the nation and the world to come and join us virtually on campus. But our student groups will be supported to host in-person, hybrid and online events. RWU Law will make sure that you have the technology needs for that, whether it’s a Zoom meeting or even a Zoom webinar. We look forward to working with all of our student groups – coordinating both through the Library and with Chelsie Horne in Programming and Events – to make sure you can have the events that you need.

If we take classes remotely, will it affect financial aid stipends?

No. There is no change to the cost of attendance for students electing to take classes online. Students remain eligible for the same budget for the year. The Office of Financial Aid is available to answer additional questions.

Will there still be parking fees?

Parking is opt-in, so you don’t have to pay for parking. If you do opt in, if you need parking, it is all-year or nothing. That’s the University standard, and that’s what we have to abide by as well.

Will the University put our parking fee refund for the spring toward the coming year?

Yes, refunds for parking will be applied as credit toward the Fall Semester.

Will we be reimbursed for the fitness center?

There is no separate rec center fee.

What’s the “who, what, where, when and why” regarding textbooks?

It’ll be the normal process, where you order your books online. The bookstore does recognize that, for students who will be remote, they’ll need to make shipping arrangements.

Can we use the lockers as usual?

It’s something we’ll have to consider more, but lockers could probably be used with six-feet social distancing. You might have to wait to allow someone else to clear the area so that you can access your lockers. I will make a note to make sure we have sanitizing stations in the locker room.

How will shuttle service be impacted this fall?

Shuttle service will available both on campus as well as in Bristol, but it will be subject to Rhode Island regulations around social distancing and capacity. So capacity right now is severely limited on public transportation, and we’ll have to update students as to what to reasonably expect about relying on shuttle transportation.
Where can I learn more about RWU's reopening in Fall 2020?

The University's "Reopening Roger" site is an excellent resource.

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TUITION & FEES: Dean Gregory W. Bowman

First, I’d like to say a word about resilience. This coming year is going to be a challenging one, perhaps especially for those of you who are in your second and third years. You’re looking at what was a tough Spring Semester continuing into the Fall Semester. But you’re also learning how to not just survive, but to thrive in these challenging times. And resilience is an essential skill for a successful lawyer. Sure, it’s no fun, but try to think of this as an opportunity to show your mettle. Embrace it as an opportunity and a challenge from which you can learn. I don’t mean to sound pie-in-the-sky about it, but there really is a lot to learn from adversity. And frankly, I’ve learned a lot about myself here already – and I’ve developed a faith in the people that I’m joining here at Roger Williams University. They do their work and they do it so well.

Will there be a reduction in tuition and fees?

I want to be as upfront and transparent as possible about this. There is not going to be a discount on tuition and fees. There has been a lot of conversation about this at universities and colleges across the nation, and this decision will apply University-wide at Roger Williams. The reason is that we are focused on giving you the training, the skills, and the expertise you need to succeed. The outcome is our focus, and you’re going to get that.

Whether you get it in an online learning environment, an in-person learning environment or some hybrid of the two, outcome is what we are committed to. And one of the interesting things we’ve learned already is that – while online teaching and learning certainly have their challenges – there are some great benefits as well, and combining online and in-person elements can make for an even more innovative learning environment.

How did the school arrive at the decision to not reduce tuition and fees, when we’re not using the school’s facilities and other resources as we usually would – for example, the library, the gym, the shuttle, etc.?

Fees are used to provide all sorts of resources, all the things that support the program of higher education we have at the School of Law and the University. And these resources are still being used; there is learning and education and training going on. There may not be as much use of certain on-campus facilities and resources – but we are continuing to provide the educational program that we’re supposed to provide, and we’re adding to our technology for online and distance education. This is a decision that’s been made across the University.

Yes, the experience is very different. Even hybrid, it’s very different. But the outcome – that you become a career-ready, practice-ready lawyer who has had robust training in the doctrine,
The modality is different, but it is the same training and practice readiness that you would have had if we were not online at all.

Will the cost of attendance be different for students who take all classes online?

No, being online (remote) will not change the cost of attendance.

How does the University plan to compensate students for the lack of experiential opportunities due to the pandemic – such as externships, internships and clinical opportunities?

Clinical externships should be running as usual. Some placement sites will be remote, and some will be in-person. And yes, others might decline to take externships this semester, meaning that some students may need to be reassigned. But the externships will be taking place. In general, lawyers are finding ways to be innovative – engaging with their clients, engaging with their work, getting things done. It will be different, adjustments will be made, but there will be opportunities.

Is there a chance that the Criminal Defense Clinic will be canceled altogether?

All three of our in-house clinics will be up and running in the fall, though they certainly will not look the same as they have in past years. The Business Start-Up Clinic will be run entirely remotely, while the Criminal Defense Clinic and the Immigration Clinic will be in person as much as possible. The courts are still functioning on a very limited basis, so the nature and frequency of any court appearances may be different from in the past, but the direct work with the clients should remain largely the same. We are confident that students in each of these programs will continue to have an exceptional educational experience.

How will pro bono opportunities be impacted?

There will be continued pro bono opportunities for students.

Will we have a trial team this year or is that canceled?

I’ll have to get back to you on that one. I assume that we’ll have a trial team, but I cannot yet say for certain.

Dean Bowman, will you be teaching any fall classes?

With reluctance, I won’t be teaching this fall – but I will be in the classroom at some point soon. My focus this fall is going to be on making sure that everything runs as smoothly as possible. I want to spend a lot of time making my way, physically and virtually, all around campus to talk with the student leaders, get to know as many students as possible, meet with all faculty and staff, and meet with others across the University. That takes a lot of time, but I think it’s very important.
CONCLUSION: Dean Gregory W. Bowman

I want to thank all of you for your time and questions this evening. Please bear in mind that our twin goals are (1) to keep you safe, and (2) to give you the best quality education we possibly can give you, as has always been our goal.

Also, please know that, while we are working very hard indeed on COVID-19 planning and response, it is not the only thing we’re working on. This stuff is hard. It takes a lot of time, a lot of effort, but it is not the only thing we’re doing. It’s not all-consuming.

Our primary focus is on finding ways to innovate and be better. We’re focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and all the valuable efforts and conversation that we’ve had in that regard. The reason is that we’re dedicated to giving you the best possible experience in every possible way.

That’s why we’re here. That’s why we do what we do.

This FAQ is based upon the RWU Law online Town Hall Meeting held on the evening of June 25, 2020. The information has been updated and edited for clarity.