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Law School News

RWU Law Introduces Required Course on Race and the Law

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This fall, Roger Williams University School of Law will become one of just a handful of law schools nationwide to introduce a new required course on the subject of “Race & the Foundations of American Law” to its core legal curriculum.

Of those schools, RWU Law is one of the first to have already piloted its course – to excellent student reviews – as a spring elective. The course is designed to provide “both a historical overview and a current assessment of how race has played a role in American law and provide critical analytic tools students can bring to all aspects of their legal education and future practice.” (Full description appended below.)

After three years of strategic planning and a year of national reckoning, RWU Law designed a course aimed to improve critical thinking about the law by offering important and often overlooked perspectives on race, and to prepare students for the fast-evolving legal landscape in which they will soon be practicing.

“We did what we always do, which is to do what is best for our students,” said RWU Law Dean Gregory W. Bowman. “Offering this course aligns perfectly with our institution’s larger social justice mission. It is something we needed to do, something transformative, something that will better equip our graduates to work within the legal system to create a world that is more equitable for all.”

Since the adoption of RWU Law’s Strategic Plan for Diversity & Inclusion in 2017, the law school has been committed to addressing issues of inequality and social justice as a core part of the curriculum. Students, and in particular members of the school’s chapter of the Black Law Students Association (BLSA), have made clear that they care deeply about seeing the law school further that commitment.

“In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, BLSA students told us that we needed to do more to help educate all students about the ways in which the legal system perpetuates racial hierarchies,” said Professor Jared Goldstein, RWU Law’s Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. “The faculty agreed that we should create a required course on race and the law, one that every student would take. Making this change will help us carry out the mission we have long been dedicated to.”

In June 2020, the RWU Law faculty voted to create the course for piloting in spring 2021.

“We are leaders, not outliers,” Dean Bowman emphasized. “Our students’ input and perspectives were really helpful in this work of improving our curriculum. In fact, the ABA is considering changes to law school accreditation that would require this sort of academic programming for all law schools in the future. Here at RWU Law, we are dedicated to leading that change.”

Goldstein explained that the class – which will be a required part of the second-year curriculum – provides a service to students by introducing them to the real world in which American law has evolved.

“Since its inception, Roger Williams has been committed to preparing our students to confront the many challenges they’ll face as lawyers,” Goldstein said. “A crucial ingredient in that training is for students to understand the role of the law in creating and sustaining existing power structures, including the inequitable distribution of power by race. Students who understand the connections between race and law will be better lawyers and better prepared to work for justice.”

In order to develop and refine the course with student involvement and input, the faculty introduced it as an elective in the spring 2021 semester, co-taught by Professors Diana Hassel, Nadiyah Humber, and Nicole Dyszlewski. It was a resounding success.

“The piloting of the ‘Race & the Foundations of American Law’ course was transformative for both the students and instructors,” Hassel said. “The course created a desire to learn more about the systemic ways in which racial hierarchy has been created and supported by the law. Students who took the course will continue that exploration throughout their legal careers.”

Students agree with her assessment.

“In my 19 years of formal education, this was the best and most eye-opening class I’ve ever taken,” said Brooklyn Crockton, a rising third-year RWU Law student from Rochester, N.Y. “When the course started, I thought I knew a lot more than I did, because I am African-American myself. I thought I had a good grasp of how the law intersects with African-American issues and history, because I grew up with it. But I’d say about 90 percent of the course content was totally new to me – and I was a Africana Studies minor, too!”

Dominick Gargano, a third-year RWU Law student from Morristown, N.J., said that as a white male he felt no sense of “indoctrination.”

“What we were really studying in this class is history, factual information,” he said. “It’s not a ‘version’ of something, or an interpretation. We’re doing what we do in every other law class: looking at the facts. And you deal with that information, and then you start to think about what we can do make things better.”

Gargano added that he agreed with RWU Law’s decision to make the course a required part of the curriculum.

“From my perspective, the last few years in this country have highlighted some of the social justice issues we need to tackle, including systemic racism,” he said. “This course offers an exploration and explanation of how we got to where we are – including lack of empathy, lack of education, lack of understanding, too much stereotyping. I mean, we all have to struggle in life, but people should not be struggling because of the color of their skin or any other immutable characteristic. We have a profession that is diverse. We have men and women of all different colors and ethnicities, and this course conveys information that’s essential to understanding one another.”

“What Roger Williams is doing with this course is an absolute necessity for everyone,” Crockton agreed. “I think it’s going to make people very uncomfortable, but I also think it’s important that we don’t shy away or back down from that challenge. What you take away at the end of the class, as a future lawyer, is an incredible wealth of indispensable knowledge and understanding.”