Leaning into Uncertainty

Ensuring Quality Legal Education During Coronavirus

Conference Report

Roundtable 4: Sustaining a Sense of Place and Well Being for our Students

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The fourth roundtable, **"Sustaining a Sense of Place and Well Being for Our Students,"** explored how institutional leaders can help create community on a virtual campus. This question is especially important since most students didn't seek an online learning experience. As part of this discussion, participants considered three questions: how to build community virtually, how to address new accessibility concerns, and how to provide resources that promote students' well being.

Emily Scivoletto, Senior Assistant Dean for Student Affairs at University of California, Davis, School of Law, organized the roundtable and presented it with **Staci Rucker**, Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs, Student Affairs and Diversity at University of Cincinnati College of Law.

Question I. How can law schools continue to create a distinct "place" for students with a created sense of belonging and shared experience?

1. **Professor- or administration-led:**

   a. Creating a class community:
      i. Open Zoom before class for students to chat. Encourage them to stay on after;
      ii. Give an initial "getting to know you" questionnaire at the beginning of a course. Takes a lot of time but you learn so much from the students; and
      iii. Consider breaking up the 1L class into cohorts, perhaps groups of 12-20 with 1-2 faculty mentors plus 2L/3L mentors/tutors.

   b. Creating connections:
      i. Have virtual lunches/coffee hours with faculty/staff—no real formality, just pop in and talk. Times can be consistent or staggered;
      ii. Create virtual spaces that are similar to physical spaces on campus (e.g., student lounge, cafe, virtual study rooms that are topic-specific); and
      iii. Hold weekly law student town halls led by faculty/admin.

   c. Other:
      i. Create book series with professors (good way to connect students with faculty), and
      ii. With common reading for entering class, have break out groups of just 1Ls discuss readings.

2. **Student-to-student connections:**

   a. Creating relationships:
      i. Assist students as needed in creating their own groups and surveys for students;
      ii. Possible use of TAs/RAs to create community;
      iii. Designate a peer mentor; and
      iv. If housing 1Ls, put them in the same sections on the same floors to create a "learning community" for those students. Create housing tool kit.

   b. Supporting student organizations:
      i. Student org. events are submitted through a centralized monitoring system, and information is pushed out to the entire campus;
      ii. Student org. presidents set up Zoom meetings based on interest areas. Invite the entire student body to participate;
      iii. Hold online opening parties with student organizations and virtual fair;
      iv. For smaller schools, affinity groups can be small. Connect with affinity groups at other law schools to create community across law schools; and
      v. Work with SBA/law reviews to do various virtual social events like happy hours, etc.

   c. Event ideas
      i. Award ceremonies on Zoom;
      ii. Keeping annual events/traditions;

    iii. Graduation;

    iv. Day of Service/Community;

    v. Virtual talent shows, "show and tell" with pets. LL.M. talent show;

    vi. Use social media to create community events through trivia contests, games, watch parties, student spotlights, etc.;

    vii. Annual ping-pong tournament, all school, in a large atrium. Two people at a time, bring your own paddle, have it take all year if needed;

    viii. If you have outdoor space, order tailgate tents and bring in small groups 6-10 without any food and with safe distancing where people can meet under the tent for a strictly social gathering; and

    ix. Movie nights about social justice issues, with questions and faculty-led discussions.

3. **Creating connections—general:**

  a. Daily or weekly email message;

    i. Weekly events, student org. events, announcements, etc.

  b. Alumni events: engage '08/'09 alums who have seen hard job market; and

  c. Opportunities to engage in community service.

4. **Anticipated issues:**

  a. Avoiding Zoom burnout: after spending all day in Zoom classes, do students want to go and spend another hour in a Zoom meeting?;

  b. Creating a "place" in person but with social distancing when large groups can't be close together. Use outdoor spaces or borrow space from nearby buildings?;

  c. Students might not read emails as we struggle to get their attention; and

  d. Individual student engagement will be different depending on variables like energy, other commitments, etc.

5. **Other thoughts:**

  a. Think about what is helping us personally to feel a sense of "place" as employees/law school community members and whether what is helping us can also help our students;

  b. Thinking about large scale training like implicit bias in a 250-person class: how do you teach a difficult topic like that remotely and create a sense of community?;

  c. Let's not assume we have all the answers. Reach out to students/constituents and find out what they want;

  d. Ask students about other online platforms they are using besides Zoom (avoids "Zoom fatigue") and host experiences via those tools;

  e. Communities already exist online: what pieces can we take from those communities and apply to a law school community?;

  f. Are there spaces where social distancing can work on your campus in the fall?; and

g. The National Association of Law Students Affairs Professional (NALSAP) is a helpful organization for these questions. They have meetings in which these types of questions are discussed:

   i. NALSAP Summer Webinar Series (https://www.nalsap.org/page/Summer_2020_Webinar_Series): need a membership, but many law schools are institutional members.

Question II. The health and wellness of our students impacts all aspects of their learning as well as their social and professional growth. What can law schools do to support the wellbeing of our students?

1. Framework of support/programs hosted by schools:
   a. Structure:
      i. Wellness Committee or Groups;
      ii. Create a taskforce of students that represent different affinity groups. Students could create social media pages on various topics; and
      iii. Orientation or small groups: use software called "Remo" (https://remo.co/) that simulates being at a table with others.

2. Events:

   a. Community circles: weekly opportunities to vent, have an outlet. Themed or with a trained facilitator;

   b. Develop new workshops specifically addressing new or exacerbated stressors (e.g., anxiety, depression, food insecurity, housing); and

   c. Collaborate with clinic, university counselling office, etc. One school built a wellness program based on things like: mindset, movement, nutrition, and recovery. Each unit had guest speakers and five info sessions. Handouts are included in all-school communication. Gave a holistic approach to wellness.

3. Individual students:

   a. Use student tracking software: Symplicity's "Advocate" or another software called "Starfish," and

   b. Create a case manager/ombudsperson role (someone to direct students to the correct resources).

4. Information sharing:

   a. Making sure students know where to get counseling;

   b. Create wellness newsletter that includes information on where to find resources;

   c. Highlight important services earlier, including disability accommodations. Consider short videos dicussing the process and proactively pinpointing available resources;

d. Be clear with students about what the law school is doing to keep them safe if returning in the fall; and

e. Include wellness in professionalism training: focusing on your own wellness is part of professionalism and will contribute to your success (i.e., don't wait till you're an attorney to learn how to take care of yourself).

5. **Anticipated issues:**

a. Think carefully about how to track students' wellness and well-being;
b. Concern about students who have "disappeared." Zoom and email does not always work;
c. Students seemed to also get a bit overwhelmed with all the different platforms, meetings, events, and other changes that were coming to them as a result of the switch to virtual learning;
d. Harder for students to catch and process information. Affects mental health when you don't know what is going on. Managing communications can help;
e. Difficult time for counseling: usual coping techniques like going outside, meeting with friends, etc. can't be done; and
f. Some students have to work to make money. They have to be at risk so they can pay their rent.

6. **Other thoughts:**

a. Create Google form (that's easy to submit) about students who miss class or deadlines, over-communicate with Dean of Students;
b. Mindfulness Apps (Market to students as a way to get better grades?);
    i. Calm with the premium membership. A school worked with a vendor for free memberships;
    ii. Headspace; and
    iii. 10% Happier.
c. Weekly mindfulness and other health opportunities tend to get low attendance, but students report being really happy knowing that things are being offered;
d. We should be assessing the work we do regarding well-being (and this is a good thing to do overall); and
e. Encourage students to create a designated office space at home where they work.

Question III. With the impact of COVID-19 elevating the issues of access disparity and the diverse needs of our students, how can law schools minimize the threat to learning continuity and academic success?

1. **Institutional actions:**

a. Impacted populations:
    i. Create virtual plans for students who cannot return to campus due to health concerns, childcare issues, etc.;
    ii. International students: days will have to be much longer to ensure class times can be held at a reasonable time for those students;
    iii. For students with caregiving responsibilities: make days much longer or space out courses. Doing so could significantly impact those students;

    iv.   Resources, instruction, and exams must continue to be designed to take into account low-income students, caregivers, first-generation students, et al. Prioritize individualized counseling and outreach as well as flexibility in assessments and scheduling; and

    v.   Assist students who do not want to appear on video because they don't want to show their living environment or for another reason.

- Make sure faculty know that students may not share backgrounds for various reasons (e.g., no camera, lack of bandwidth, privacy concerns) and not just because they are "slackers");
- Be aware that students may be worried about their classmates' opinions; and
- Hearing needs of students? Visually impaired students?
    - Zoom has built in support for the hearing impaired. You can assign someone to do live captioning. Some use "Otter" for transcription.

b. Create partnerships:

    i.   Partner with law firms/alums: one law school had a program where the students could email their outlines to the firm, have them printed and FedExed in one day. Helped students who did not have a printer. Have to be creative;

    ii.   Ask alumni if they can help with offering physical space (office/conference room) students can borrow to take exams;

    iii.   Brown Bag faculty workshop on best practices for delivering content electronically and considering issues like access disparity;

    iv.   Ask faculty to teach during evenings and weekends to offer students some flexibility; and

    v.   While having a food pantry is difficult to operate now, Amazon Pantry is a good alternative. Students who are in need can list their desired pantry items without showing their names. Individual donors can donate items to students.

c. Information/Communication:

    i.   Put together clear lists of what technology students will need to have in the event we go online, and

    ii.   Gather helpful feedback for faculty by surveying students about how this past semester went; work on implementing feedback this summer.

d. Accommodations:

    i.   Talk with faculty about flexibility in accommodations during this time;

    ii.   At one school students were allowed to take all the time they wanted over the entire exam time period to finish the open book exams;

    iii.   Students who are parents;

    iv.   Students who previously did not seek accommodations needed resources after the shift to remote learning; and

    v.   Timed exams could start any time during a 24-hour period to allow for flexibility. ExamSoft has 24-hour tech support available and is helpful for international students.

2. Anticipated issues:

   a. Issue of "space" for students who don't have adequate space for learning (e.g., corner of kitchen or bathroom);

   b. For international students living abroad, the time differences have caused issues;

   c. The challenge is that nearly every solution requires money;

   d. Printers: not everybody has the advantage of having a printer at home. One idea is to make a rule that students cannot print out their exams so that no one has an advantage over other students;

   e. There are inherent inequalities built into a hybrid model: some people are not able to/won't attend in person;

   f. For people who are hard of hearing, learning in a classroom in which everybody is wearing a mask would likely be a challenge; and

   g. Need to address whether a person who is immunocompromised qualifies under ADA.

3. Other thoughts

   a. Scheduling and instruction options must account for immunocompromised students with high-risk family members (what about ABA standards?);

   b. The uniqueness of 1L experience and transition means perhaps prioritizing on-campus instruction for those students;

   c. Do not overlook extra challenges for some international and undocumented students; and

   d. Look at the resources provided by Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD).

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