Leaning Uncertainty into

Ensuring Quality Legal Education During Coronavirus

Conference Report

Roundtable 5: Maintaining Morale and Community Among Faculty and Staff

Drexel
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Roundtable 5, titled **"Maintaining Morale and Building Community,"** focused on how to retain positive aspects of a school's culture that existed before the pandemic and how to make progress or move forward in developing that culture during the next phase of the pandemic.

Participants were asked questions on what they thought defined their community's culture and if that culture could be replicated online. Additionally, participants were asked to acknowledge the losses associated with change and the cultural elements that may be sacrificed in this shift to a remote environment. A second set of questions focused on the challenges ahead as schools shift from emergency management designed for a few weeks or months to creating choices and structures for the long term.

Overall, participant discussion revealed the need to anticipate new modes of community engagement and communication, given the likelihood that the pandemic will continue to disrupt regular modes of socializing and in-person interactions. However, this discussion of emergency and long-term management was framed as an opportunity for growth.
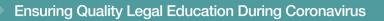
Zahr Said, Associate Dean of Research & Faculty Development and Professor of Law at University of Washington School of Law, organized the roundtable and presented it with **William McGeveran**, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at University of Minnesota Law School.

Question I. How do we maintain the type and amount of morale and positive culture that existed in our community before COVID-19?

1. **Pre-pandemic communities and traditions:**

   a. Institutional structures
      i. Clinics (a very positive part of the law school culture);
      ii. Skill-based cohorts;
      iii. Intentional pairing of cohorts;
      iv. Legal writing sections;
      v. Lunch & Learn (for faculty);
      vi. Food-driven programming;
      vii. Community;
      viii. Houses; and
      ix. Peer-to-peer socializing.

   b. Slogans or values
      i. Work hard, play hard;
      ii. We are all in this together;
      iii. Signature color;
      iv. Family;
      v. Collegial, common mission; and
      vi. Non-hierarchical.

   c. Informal events
      i. Student-faculty talent show;
      ii. Trivia night;
      iii. Less structured sessions (allow the entire college of law community to be heard);
      iv. Programming was often food-driven (and/or included alcohol); often focused on location (college, being in a college town); and sometimes built around public service as most students go into service after graduation;
      v. Frequent in-person faculty and staff meetings;
      vi. Recurring events (such as Wellness Wednesday); and

   d. Formal events
      i. Graduation (2020 class graduation ceremony in person April 2021; then 2021 grads have ceremony in May [Washington & Lee])

   e. Highlights, pride, and praise
      i. Celebrating points of pride for the community in schoolwide communications
         1. Emails that share faculty/student/staff successes

   f. Events based on student successes/celebrations

   g. Daily tweet from dean of law school (includes variety of quotes)

   h. Recognition, expressing appreciation

      i.   Gratitude board; encouraging others to share news and thanks

2. **What will you miss the most?:**

   a. The familiar or "the way we were" (things will continue to be different)
   b. Human connection
      i.   Seeing staff; seeing students informally/not on Zoom, and
     ii.   Impact on social relations of moving to mask and plastic barriers.
   c. Unscheduled meetings
      i.   Informal, spontaneous interaction; venting informally
   d. Graduation; hooding ceremonies
      i.   Regarding graduation, students were upset and faculty/staff efforts to acknowledge these feelings were not as effective as one-on-one communications, and
     ii.   Our offices.
   e. Freedom of movement (especially in densely populated groups)
      i.   Traditional ways of going to work on public transportation
   f. Losing the sense of a shared mission
   g. Given what you identify as central to your culture, which ones can transition easily?:
      i.   To a fully virtual world;
     ii.   To a partially virtual world; and
    iii.   To a socially distant/partially on-campus world.
        1.   Which stakeholders benefit most under each of the three options above?

3. **Ideas for replicating in-person connections and culture:**

   a. Create interactions that are student-led. For example, Instagram takeovers; Zoom takeovers; student "lounge" held open on Zoom;
   b. Make space for impromptu conversations and interactions;
   c. Open meetings and classes a couple minutes early so that people can chat pre-meeting;
   d. Replicate once-a-week faculty lunch on Zoom where faculty can drop in and drop out;
   e. Group meetings to discuss issued court decisions or other things;
   f. Organize community-wide events that are virtual or socially distant;
      i.   Virtual poker night, virtual game night, virtual baking classes (e.g., trivia night with pizza party [pizzas delivered to each member of small team and everyone answers the same 4 questions & use for trivia game])
   g. Outdoor discussions, speakers, or activities;
      i.   Maximize use of outdoors
   h. How do we support student organizations' activities, which may be the life of the school?
      i.   Connect students nationwide, students from various schools' pool events;
     ii.   Explore options with virtual speakers (save money on travel expenses); and
    iii.   Planning meetings over the summer with students' organizations.
   i. Repurpose building to build morale
      i.   Using the building for things other than class: events, study space, etc.

4. **Increasing and improving communication?:**

    a. Use new modes and change frequency of communication;
    b. Establish certain norms around meeting and communicating to create consistency and stability (e.g., frequency of meeting, returning calls, or emails within a set time and breaking up days of Zoom meetings with camera-free calls);
    c. Use digital tools/Internet to develop lines of communication for faculty and staff;
        i.   Use "Slack channel" for faculty to share;
        ii. Chat list (assigned by HR director); and
        iii. Explore Microsoft Teams.
    d. Create a regular pattern of communication from leaders to faculty, staff and students;
        i.   Issue weekly communication by dean to all (faculty, staff, alumni, students) re: what's going on (e.g., bar exam).
    e. Survey students before a town hall to gather data; and
    f. Emails with resource links re: wellness; webinars; articles of interest.

5. **What does morale mean?:**

    a. Satisfaction in one's work or community;
    b. Belonging (for ourselves) and inclusion (for others);
    c. Connection (lost glue or center of institution);
    d. Valuing others and feeling valued;
    e. Shared purpose/goal/mission which is what unites us; and
    f. Compassion: caring for others.

6. **Coping strategies for loss of morale:**

    a. Staff morale is important; hierarchies and divide between staff and faculty;
    b. Create regular communications (many stressed the importance of this for morale);
    c. Create regular opportunities for acknowledgement (staff, faculty and students);
    d. Bolster trust and optimism;
    e. Acknowledge losses as real: grief over change (graduation, bar exam, altered 1L experience, loss of scholarly opportunity, loss of time as teaching completely redesigned);
    f. Emphasize common mission: remind everyone about what binds them, shared pathway;
    g. Get creative;
        i.   Creating videos of faculty (e.g., each member has two minutes to get their pet to perform a trick) send video to students to enhance approachability, and
        ii. Video encouragement for exams, graduation video.

7. **Treating faculty, staff, and students with compassion?:**

    a. Survey staff to determine needs and concerns as personal circumstances have changed;
    b. Maximize flexibility with staff schedules;
        i.   Doing things at more expanded hours (weekends, nights) has been helpful for some people

with other commitments, and maybe should have been done all along. But, respect individuals' boundaries (no late meetings for some, etc.).

   c.   Identify how economic concerns are affecting people and provide intentional support;
- i.   Hold an organized session on finances for people who are struggling;
- ii.   Identify professional development opportunities;
- iii.   Highlight some faculty on webinars to talk through issues everyone is dealing with during the crisis;
- iv.   Understand that everyone is doing their best; say "thank you," "shout-out" awards; and
- v.   Be creative about benefits we can give to say "thank you" to staff who are going above and beyond (e.g., extra vacation, discretionary time, meeting-free times).

   d.   Discuss how to identify and prevent burnout;

   e.   Solicit input on how to keep everyone engaged;

   f.   Discuss and model self-care;
- i.   Get outside;
- ii.   Shutdown computer;
- iii.   Take vacation; and
- iv.   Practice intentional scheduling.

   g.   Be explicit about intentions to protect vulnerable communities and populations;

   h.   Be aware of inequities between faculty and staff;
- i.   Staff, unlike faculty, cannot choose whether or not to be in the building

   i.   Be aware of training so that people are not stopped at entrances and questioned disproportionately based on race, gender, age, or other factors; and

   j.   Rethink who has to work remotely or work part-time.

Question II: How do we build new traditions and norms in this moment to create growth? Can we use this incredibly challenging pandemic to improve our law school's culture and foster greater community cohesion?

1.   **Elements of pre-pandemic culture that could be improved or strengthened:**

   a.   Greater justification for insisting on the importance of self-care;
- i.   Opportunity to address mental health, prevalence of medication for insomnia and anxiety, and
- ii.   Opportunity for leaders to set models and norms for work/life balance.

   b.   Conferences moving to being remote is a possible boon, particularly to smaller, less-well funded faculties; and

   c.   Higher faculty presence in law school events and interactions, if they are normally limited because they are commuters.

2.   **Opportunities for building new cultural norms or implementing new practices:**

   a.   Opportunity to capitalize on faculty's growing familiarity with technology;
- i.   Exploring tools to improve the remote working environment, and
- ii.   Use technologies (web conferencing, polling) to create virtual connection.

b. Opportunity to grow new connections between faculty and staff, and faculty and students; and
   i. Provides opportunities that weren't available before that get more participation now, such as happy hours, retirement recognition, talent show, dog/cat meet and greet, yoga, mindfulness, book club, meditation, bake-off, etc.;
   ii. Figure out different things to do over the summer to keep people engaged, even existing students and incoming students; and
   iii. This might be an opportunity to build community not around law. Students are often suspicious of non-law stuff from a law school and this might be a chance to change that: offering cooking classes, book clubs, foreign language learning, etc.
c. Opportunity to rethink time management and scheduling;
   i. More intentional efforts and thoughtfulness with scheduling;
   ii. Increased capacity for flexibility with staff (children, elderly parent[s], high-risk groups, etc.); and
   iii. Trust staff to do what they are supposed to do, especially if they are getting the work done.

3. **Creating equity in post-pandemic culture:**

a. Consider student population that comes from underserved backgrounds with multiple challenges;
   i. Family responsibilities;
   ii. Travel, perhaps hours;
   iii. May have to work, take care of children or parents; and
   iv. Students need to be practice-ready and they are working hard; for some it means scraping by just to make it.
b. Consider students who can't be in the classroom or need accommodation; and
c. Develop a policy on tuition reduction.

4. **Strategies for saving time or other resources:**

a. Moving paper files over to digital has been more efficient;
b. There's also less bureaucracy because there's less travel, fewer expenditures, etc.;
   i. Commuting costs down; Savings due to less travel;
   ii. Savings due to less food and alcohol (won't be feeding students at lunch every day or at faculty workshops once a week); and
   iii. However, schools have students and need to offer them services. There may be new costs associated with shift to remote environment; it's a little early to determine savings.
c. Time saved due to no longer needing to commute. Some people arguably have more time in day; sit at desk from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.;
   i. Risk or downside: work creeping into life and Zoom meetings are not necessarily efficient. Doing everything remotely can make everything take longer;
   ii. Devoting more hours to work since fewer fun things to do. Working all night and feel compelled to reply; and
   iii. Morale loss: overwork is creeping in everywhere.
d. National Association of Law Student Affairs Professionals (NALSAP) is planning to provide

tutorials on using Zoom to teach effectively (students will be expecting more);

e. Add service orientation to collective mission: started a project to provide information for people to apply for unemployment benefits. Many faculty and staff have signed up to help students. Faculty have also raised some money for cafeteria staff in law school; and

    i. People may be exhausted by day-to-day duties; but it may energize them if they are doing things that are not necessarily related to their job, like collective efforts to assist the community

f. Think about how to redeploy staff in more efficient ways.

5. **Creating an inspired scholarly culture in the middle of a pandemic:**

a. Still want to maintain some intellectual engagement from speakers and faculty events;

b. Some efficiencies or gains around conferences, travel, event planning;

c. Scholarly endeavors (symposia, roundtables);

    i. Conferences moving online become challenging; but when budgets are limited, it may be that people are more comfortable with Zoom and can attend more conferences;

    ii. The ability to attend conferences is easier generally, but it's hard to do with childcare responsibilities at home;

    iii. Clinical legal education association allows clinical faculty with no time or money to attend these conferences (not necessarily to present); and

    iv. Have a clinical pedagogy series internally: can invite other people to present to clinical faculty.

d. Leadership should be transparent about research expectations over summer and changed funding situations; and

    i. One school says it will still do summer research grants but recognizes that the summer will be spent redesigning courses and not just research and writing. Will take that into account when looking at annual reports;

    ii. Consider those that need additional financial resources; and

    iii. Acknowledge the shift in expectations for the faculty.;

e. Finding time for scholarship is challenging;

    i. Hard to maintain scholarship when faculty are rightfully busy trying to transition to the teaching part of their jobs as well as having demands at home that didn't exist as much in pre-pandemic times (e.g., children home from school);

    ii. Everything is bleeding together; arguably individuals could be more effective, but home has started intruding into work;

    iii. Lack of childcare (e.g., camps) over summer; and

    iv. Regarding summer workshop series, working remotely allows for innovations of format and audience.

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