



U OF L BRANDEIS
SCHOOL OF LAW

Louisville Law begins new academic year in context of pandemic, push for racial justice

The 2020-2021 academic year will be a history-making one for education, and legal education will be no exception. For law, a profession and educational model that relies heavily on tradition and precedent, the global coronavirus pandemic has been a challenge for many reasons: a swift transition to distance learning, employment uncertainty, and a postponed and now remotely administered bar exam, to name just a few examples.

In addition, of course, this spring also brought the centuries-long struggle for racial justice to the national stage in a new way. Police violence and subsequent protests have consumed the conversation here in Louisville, and these are topics that we as a city — and as lawyers — need to face head-on.

It is in this context, amidst a pandemic and in a true national moment of reckoning, that the University of Louisville School of Law prepares to welcome a new class of future lawyers.

As Dean, I am extremely proud of the way our students, faculty and staff have united, and I look forward to what will surely be an unforgettable year. In this column, I will outline just a few of the things the local bench and bar can expect from Louisville Law this year.

NEW PROGRAMMING, STAFFING AIMED AT DIVERSITY, STUDENT SUPPORT

In July, Professors Laura McNeal and Cedric Merlin Powell, along with other scholars from the University of Louisville, the Student Bar Association, the Black Law Students Association, Bellarmine University and Louisville's Behavioral Wellness Clinic, participated in a virtual panel. The topic: Addressing Systemic Inequality: A Guide to White Allyship. The speakers covered a variety of topics related to our country's systemic racism: voting rights, the harm of neutrality in the face of inequality and the systemic inequalities in the education system.

Kalynn Walls, a rising 3L and incoming President of the SBA, was an organizer of this panel. She says SBA saw the need for a critical and constructive conversation about systemic inequality.

“As future lawyers, we have a role to play in this area,” she said, adding that she anticipates that SBA and its incoming Diversity Chair will organize more events — both virtual and safely physically distanced — surrounding the ongoing calls for justice in Louisville. She listed downtown cleanups, virtual panels with alumni and opportunities for law students to offer support to protestors who have been arrested as examples.

Of course, SBA will also support students — especially incoming first-years. Kalynn acknowledged that this class is entering law school at a particularly uncertain time.

“Every 1L — COVID or not — comes into law school not knowing what to expect,” she said.

SBA is organizing virtual panels consisting of upper-level students who can provide insights on their experiences with distance learning in the spring and offer support to incoming students.



Dean Coel

Kalynn and the SBA are working very closely with Crystal Rae Coel, Assistant Dean for Student Affairs and Diversity. Dean Coel comes to us after 25 years at Murray State University and brings with her a wealth of knowledge and energy for this new role.

In addition to the traditional duties of an Assistant Dean for Student Affairs — such as academic advising, student events, wellness and counseling — Dean Coel will also work with the School of Law community to develop and implement policies, training and programming to champion an inclusive and diverse law school.

Dean Coel knows from experience that law school can be a very stressful time, one that can be exacerbated by outside forces — whether it's a global pandemic, societal unrest or family demands.

“This Office of Student Affairs and Diversity will promote healthy competition and a collaborative spirit. When I was in law school, there were some wonderful people and initiatives, but they were often overshadowed by unnecessary arrogance, unhealthy anxiety or extreme jealousy. I want to help Brandeis to always focus on respect, commonalities and love,” she said.

NEW COURSE: BREONNA TAYLOR'S LOUISVILLE: RACE, EQUITY AND LAW

I will be moderating a one-credit course with this title. The course will meet once a week and every week will consider a different topic, from policing to housing and health care and educational opportunity or the lack thereof. Each session will feature a different speaker or speakers, with an aim to identify the solutions to address problems of systemic inequality and — as my colleague Cedric Merlin Powell so memorably said to me recently, “the pandemics of race.”

I also wanted to hear from students about the Black Lives Matter protests. For her part, when I asked how she wanted to see the School of Law engage issues of structural inequality, Elizabeth Muwanga, a rising 3L who is a dual degree student also completing an MS in Social Work at the Kent School, told me, “I would like to see people get uncomfortable.” By this, she said she meant that we need to recognize that “a lot of legal education is based on privilege. It is so hard for some students

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to get in and stay in. What I would like to see from the School is to say” to less-privileged students: “here are the resources.”

TRANSITION TO DISTANCE LEARNING

Amidst these challenging and important issues that Louisville Law – like all social institutions - must address in 2020-2021, we will also for the first time be teaching with a mix of teaching modalities. They include physically distanced, in-person classes, fully online courses, and hybrid courses – meaning a blend of in-person and online learning. Clinics and externships will largely continue to be in-person.



Professor McNeal

These options are not what any of us expected when we began our teaching careers, and I thank Professor Laura McNeal, a longtime champion of robust, thoughtfully designed online teaching, for her work in guiding the faculty into this new reality.

Professor McNeal, who holds a Ph.D. in Education, has a strong background in teacher education and educational policy. She also has experience teaching law classes online and has been a resource for faculty who need guidance on using remote learning platforms and best practices for distance learning.

Here, she shares some thoughts on her recent experience:

What are some lessons you’ve learned during this time?

This global pandemic has highlighted the importance of having an infrastructure in place to seamlessly convert to an online program in the event of an emergency. Whether it is another pandemic or a terrorist attack, we must be ready.

What is a major concern you have heard from faculty moving to online education for the first time, and how has the School of Law addressed that concern?

Most faculty were concerned about whether converting their traditional Socratic teaching method to an online format would foster the same robust collaborative classroom discourse.

As we know, the cornerstone of the Socratic teaching method is a dialectic classroom exchange that encourages divergent views, thoughtful analysis and meaningful connections to theory, research and practice. We addressed this concern by encouraging faculty to teach synchronous as opposed to asynchronous classes, which allow faculty and students to simultaneously be present for live lectures and discussion.

Are there any successes you would like to share?

We have been fortunate to have a dedicated group of faculty who have worked tirelessly to obtain the skills and knowledge to transform into an entirely online program, without compromising high-quality instruction. The faculty’s unyielding support to our students during these difficult times has been simply amazing. It is an honor and privilege to work with such a compassionate and dedicated group of scholars.

STUDENT VOICES

Given the exceptional character next year will take, I also wanted to take the emotional temperature of a few students as we approach what may sometimes be a turbulent year.

When asked about her experience with online learning, Elizabeth Muwanga reported that she had not had any online law classes before the Spring but that some of the experiences have been very positive. “I took Professor Abrams for Family Law this summer. She is a phenomenal teacher. It was a great class and left me prepared for the Bar and practice.” Elizabeth is also mother to five children, including five-year old twins. She spoke of the challenges “juggling my education and theirs, as well as parenting.” These COVID-19-induced challenges are especially great for students like Elizabeth who have caregiving responsibilities.

I later spoke with Sarah Hall, an incoming 1L who is taking part in our 3+3 Accelerated Law Program. This program allows eligible undergraduate students to enroll in law school during what would be their senior year, completing their final year of undergraduate studies alongside the 1L curriculum.

Sarah, a criminal justice major, said she has wanted to attend law school since she was 8 years old. She was inspired to pursue public service after watching her parents, both police officers.

She said that while starting law school during a pandemic is “nerve-wracking,” she did not want to defer starting.

“I’m really excited to just dive in,” she said. “I’ve been thinking about this and preparing for this for so long.”

Sarah, who was an undergraduate at the University of Louisville when it made the sudden transition to distance learning in the spring, said she was heartened by her experience then. She felt her professors and the university supported her, and believes “the administration at UofL is going to make sure that students have what they need to be successful.”

I also talked with incoming 1L Frank Bencomo-Suarez, who described his feelings approaching this year as “uncertain, but cautiously optimistic.”

Frank shared that he is less concerned with learning the course material online than with his ability to learn other skills, such as public speaking and debate, that often are developed in in-person classes. He also worries about meeting and connecting with fellow students when learning remotely; Frank has spent the past year as a legal intern at the ACLU of Kentucky, where he has heard attorneys in the legal department speak highly of the bonds they formed with law school classmates.

But Frank didn’t want to defer law school another year and is eager to pursue his goal of becoming a strong advocate for his clients.

“The idea that you could advocate for better drew me in to law school,” he said. “I’m looking forward to expanding my knowledge base. There’s a very particular way of thinking that law school develops in people. I’m very interested in learning to think like that.”

I was encouraged by the positive attitudes of our students. Recent months have not been easy for any of us and it was gratifying to be reminded of the excitement of engaging a new class of law students, and of the important work that lawyers and legal education performs in our society.



Colin Crawford, dean of the University of Louisville Brandeis School of Law, serves on the boards of both the Louisville Bar Association and the Louisville Bar Foundation.