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**FROM A DISTANCE: PROVIDING ONLINE ACADEMIC SUPPORT
AND BAR EXAM PREPARATION TO LAW STUDENTS AND
ALUMNI DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

ANTONIA ALICE BADWAY MICELI*

ABSTRACT

At its core, an academic support program's mission is to help students improve their academic performance. But academic support programs also serve a broader purpose. They serve as a bridge between students, faculty, and staff, supporting faculty in their curriculum and course development and nurturing the connections between members of the law school community. They often develop and improve relations with alumni through bar exam preparation efforts. And, sometimes, they are even involved in the recruiting of new students. Through all of these interactions with students, faculty, staff, and alumni, academic support programs foster a sense of community within the law school. This Article introduces the reader to the field of law school academic support and explains the academic support program at SLU Law, both pre- and post-COVID-19. It then focuses on three areas that were the most critical to shifting the SLU Law academic support program online in the wake of the pandemic: (1) building a community with and for our students, (2) translating our physical space into an online presence, and (3) building online courses and adapting our programming while considering new questions of accessibility.

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INTRODUCTION

For me, the irony of the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic will always be that I was on sabbatical. Spring 2020 was going to be my semester of renewal—I was co-authoring a book on the Uniform Bar Exam; I had reservations to attend conferences where I could share with, and learn from, my colleagues; and most excitedly, I would have the time to sit down and read books on growth mindset and habit formation, which I wanted to build into the work I do with my students across all three years of their law school experience and during their bar examination preparation. Then, in a matter of days, I went from presenting at a conference in Texas to facilitating remote First Grade and daycare activities for my two sons, while my husband and I traded our home office for Zoom¹ calls. This new reality was a stark contrast to the Spring 2020 I had envisioned, but it was an experience that was not unique to me alone. Rather, this fast shift to emergency remote learning, and balancing this learning with a dramatically different environment and set of responsibilities, was an experience that I shared with both my students and my colleagues.

While Spring 2020 provided its own lessons in providing academic support in an online world, even more important were the lessons that I learned during Summer 2020. Amid helping shepherd our recent graduates through a perilous bar exam preparation period, my colleagues and I worked to re-envision how we would welcome the incoming class of 1Ls to law school and make sure that these students were prepared for day one. We explored new means of connecting with students, as well as how to connect them to each other, so that we could maintain the community that made Saint Louis University School of Law (SLU Law) so special to each of us. Simultaneously, we took courses in online teaching, understanding that while Spring 2020 was one of emergency remote learning, Fall 2020 must, at a minimum, be a hybrid of remote learning and traditional online learning because the summer allowed faculty to make their courses more intentionally rooted in best practices and pedagogy. We prepared for the unknown—anticipating that we would have some students physically present within the law school building, as well as the need to accommodate those students who could not be physically present because of social distancing requirements or personal situations.

Summer 2020 was an opportunity to return to the drawing board on our programs and courses, starting with the endpoint in mind—the outcomes—and working backwards to the classroom environment and mode of teaching that would best achieve those outcomes, this time in an online world. We began by looking first at the outcomes we sought for our students to achieve (greater success in law school and on the bar exam), and working backwards to consider how we would assess whether those outcomes were met and identifying what

1. Zoom is a cloud platform for video and audio conferencing, chat, and webinars.

students needed to know to reach those outcomes. Then we took a step even further back to ask ourselves how to effectively teach that material and how to create an environment that supported effective learning. This process allowed us to open our minds to new alternatives and consider more creative ways to both assess our outcomes and deliver our material. It is my belief that academic support professionals came to this challenge with an edge because we already had a whole set of tools that made it easier for us, in some ways, to make the pivot from the physical to online classroom, than a traditional law professor.

In this article, I will first introduce the reader to the field of law school academic support and explain the academic support program at SLU Law, both pre- and post-COVID-19. I will then focus on three areas that were the most critical to shifting our academic support program online: (1) building a community with our students and for our students, (2) translating our physical space into an online presence, and (3) building online courses and adapting our programming while considering new questions of accessibility.

I. WHAT IS LAW SCHOOL ACADEMIC SUPPORT?

Law school “academic support” is a broad term which encompasses a diverse group of programs nationally, utilizing many different methodologies and techniques, and spanning varied time periods, from pre-law clear through preparation for the bar examination.² At its most basic, one can consider law school academic support as “a comprehensive program designed to help law students succeed academically through a combination of substantive legal instruction, study skills, legal analysis, legal writing, and attention to learning styles.”³ Originally arising out of efforts to improve the likelihood of academic success for minority students,⁴ over the past two decades academic support programs have moved toward race-neutral models that typically focus instead

2. Louis N. Schulze, Jr., *Alternative Justifications for Law School Academic Support Programs: Self-Determination Theory, Autonomy Support, and Humanizing Law School*, 5 CHARLESTON L. REV. 269, 278–88 (2011) (describing the four main temporal categories of methodologies of the law school academic support community: (1) Pre-Law School, which generally occurs prior to law school orientation; (2) First Year, which includes different approaches depending on the focus of the law school’s program; (3) Upper-class, which are often focused on both helping students raise their GPAs and increasing the students’ likelihood of passing the bar exam; and (4) Post-Law School, which consists of continued support to students as they prepare for the bar examination).

3. Sheilah Vance, *Should the Academic Support Professional Look to Counseling Theory and Practice to Help Students Achieve?*, 69 UMKC L. REV. 499, 503 n.24 (2001).

4. Paula Lustbader, *From Dreams to Reality: The Emerging Role of Law School Academic Support Programs*, 31 U. S.F. L. REV. 839, 840–43 (1997) (describing the history of academic support programs).

on low-performing students or providing support to an entire law school class or student body.⁵

But academic support programs are more than just a student resource! Academic support programs serve as a resource to faculty, providing advice on curriculum and course development, consulting on teaching methods and student interactions, and sometimes team-teaching courses with doctrinal faculty or teaching their own doctrinal course employing academic support pedagogy.⁶ Academic support programs also help create and nurture the law school community. By breaking down the learning process into manageable pieces and instilling students with a growth mindset, academic support programs decrease the amount of competition among students.⁷ Academic support programs serve as a bridge between students and faculty by demystifying the purpose of law school teaching methods for students and similarly communicating back to faculty where students may be struggling.⁸ Many academic support programs develop and improve relations with alumni through bar exam preparation efforts, and some academic support programs are even involved in the recruiting of new students.⁹ Through all of these interactions with students, faculty, staff, and alumni, academic support programs foster a sense of community within the law school.

II. THE ACADEMIC SUPPORT PROGRAM AT SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW

A. *Pre-COVID-19*

Over the past decade, the academic support program at SLU Law has evolved into a robust series of course and programming that span from pre-Orientation through bar examination preparation. Beginning at Orientation, incoming students are welcomed into the Introduction to Legal Studies (ILS) course, which spans the entire first year of law school (1L).¹⁰ ILS introduces 1L students to the skills necessary for a successful academic experience in law school, including case reading and briefing, note taking in class, outlining, exam

5. Russell A. McLain, *Bottled at the Source: Recapturing the Essence of Academic Support as a Primary Tool of Education Equity for Minority Law Students*, 18 U. MD. L.J. RACE, RELIGION, GENDER, & CLASS 139, 140–51 (2018) (describing the evolution of law school academic support programs away from those intended to improve retention of minority students toward race-neutral models that focus on the retention of low-performing students or focus on supporting all students).

6. See Lustbader, *supra* note 4, at 844 (describing the many ways academic support programs support law school students, faculty, staff, and alumni).

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.*

10. Introduction to Legal Studies is a full-year, Pass/No Pass class, for which students receive 0.5 credits in the Fall and 0.5 credits in the Spring.

preparation, exam writing, time management, and more. Students are able to apply these skills in small group sessions led by upper-division Teaching Fellows, who serve as academic mentors for an assigned small group of 1L students for the entire year. ILS also serves as an initial introduction to the bar exam, utilizing the Multistate Performance Test (MPT) as the tool for practicing many of these academic skills. In the Spring semester of 1L year, we offer Legal Methods, which is a capture class for students based on their Fall semester grades.¹¹ Legal Methods is designed to examine the analytical process needed to solve legal problems and is extremely interactive, with regular in-class exercises and extensive written feedback. The aim of Legal Methods, as with all our capture classes, is to help students who have struggled academically in law school to further develop their academic skills so they can both improve their law school performance and overcome the statistic that they are unlikely to be successful on the bar exam.

In the Fall semester of the second year of law school (2L), we offer Advanced Legal Methodology (ALM), which is a capture class for students based on their Spring 1L class rank.¹² ALM is both an academic support course, designed to support and improve student skills in legal analysis, issue spotting, and taking exams, and an early bar exam preparation intervention course, using the MPT as the tool to practice the analytic legal process. 2L year is also when we begin to present information sessions on the Multistate Professional Responsibility Exam, which our students typically take the summer after their 2L year.

Our third year of law school (3L) programming and courses are entirely bar exam focused. Beginning in the Fall semester, we offer information sessions on the bar examination application and preparation process. In the Spring semester, we offer Advanced Legal Analysis and Strategies (ALAS), which is a capture class for students based on their Spring 2L class rank but with the option to opt-out following a meeting with the Director of Academic Support.¹³ ALAS introduces and reinforces bar examination study and test taking skills. It provides intensive writing and feedback components and provides an in-depth exploration of each part of the Uniform Bar Exam (UBE), devoting significant time to skills associated with analyzing, studying, and memorizing substantive information. Additionally, we offer an Early Bird Bar Prep series of workshops to the entire 3L class, which introduce each of the subsections of the UBE—the Multistate Essay Exam (MEE), the MPT, and the Multistate Bar Exam (MBE)—and include extensive advice on strategies for creating the best study environment

11. Legal Methods is a full semester, Pass/No Pass class, for which students receive 3 credits.

12. Advanced Legal Methodology is a seven-week, Pass/No Pass class, for which students receive 1 credit.

13. Advanced Legal Analysis and Strategies is a full semester, Pass/No Pass class, for which students receive 2 credits.

and engaging in actual bar exam study. Following graduation, we offer an Essay Workshop series for both winter and summer bar exam takers. This series of workshops allows graduates that are preparing to take the bar exam to practice their MEE and MPT skills in a structured setting and receive feedback on their practice MEEs and MPTs. Together with the SLU Law Alumni and Development Office, we also provide complimentary boxed lunches for our alumni at the Missouri bar exam.

In addition to our large group programs and academic courses, the SLU Law academic support program maintains the Academic Resource Center (ARC), which houses the offices of the Director and Assistant Director of Academic Support and Bar Examination Preparation, as well as a lending library of study aids, along with a conference table, two white boards, and soft chairs. The space was designed so that students could gather between classes to consult with an upper-division ARC Faculty Fellow, meet with me or the Assistant Director, peruse and check out study aid options, or simply grab a piece of candy and chat with each other to unwind. Over the years, this space has created a culture among our students that is open and receptive to our academic support programming and to reaching out to me when needed. I, together with the Assistant Director, provide one-on-one counseling and support to students on matters related to their academic performance and bar examination preparation, as well as to alumni seeking to obtain licensure in new jurisdictions.

B. Post-COVID-19

On March 10, 2020, Dr. Fred Pestello, President of Saint Louis University, announced that he would be suspending all in-person instruction and on-campus learning.¹⁴ This news came while the law school community was on spring break, but eventual communications from both the President and our Dean announced that on-campus learning for the entire university would be suspended through the end of the semester, with final exams moving online. By the end of March, all 199 law schools approved by the American Bar Association had transitioned to fully-online class instruction.¹⁵ I chose to step away from my sabbatical to participate in the ad hoc committee and faculty meetings which resulted in the faculty decision to shift to a Pass/No Pass grading model for Spring 2020 and also worked to address the continued need to be able to identify students who were struggling academically, despite a lack of letter grades, grade point averages, or class ranks. The Assistant Director, who had shifted from an adjunct faculty member to full-time faculty member just weeks before we shut

14. Email from Fred P. Pestello, President, St. Louis University, to St. Louis University students (Mar. 10, 2020, 6:55 PM CST) (on file with author).

15. Paul L. Caron, *100% of Law Schools Have Moved Online Due to The Coronavirus*, TAXPROF BLOG (Mar. 18, 2020), https://taxprof.typepad.com/taxprof_blog/2020/03/list-of-law-schools-that-have-moved-online-due-to-the-coronavirus.html [<https://perma.cc/DU3L-M24U>].

down, worked to support our adjunct academic support faculty in making the transition to finishing out the semester remotely and answering student questions, while I worked to raise issues of academic accommodation and support in each faculty discussion that took place over those following weeks. In light of our inability to use grades as a measure of academic restrictions, I worked with other members of the law school community to draft recommended policies to put before the faculty that would determine how our academic support classes would be populated the following academic year and circulated guidance to faculty on how to identify and refer struggling students to the ARC.

While we were shifting the academic support program online, the July 2020 bar exam was becoming a moving target around the country.¹⁶ The Assistant Director and I remained in regular contact with the Missouri Board of Law Examiners regarding if, and how, they intended to administer the July bar exam and hosted Zoom sessions with our 3L class to answer questions about the ongoing developments as they arose. As May ended, we entered the July 2020 bar exam preparation season with at least two different bar exam cohorts—those who would be taking the bar exam in jurisdictions, like Missouri, which were planning to move ahead with a July bar exam, and those in jurisdictions, like Illinois, which had decided to postpone their bar exams to one of the two additional September dates initially provided by the National Conference of Bar Examiners (NCBE).¹⁷ By the beginning of June, because so many jurisdictions had decided it was unsafe to offer an in-person bar exam during any of the times provided by the NCBE, the NCBE announced that it would provide “a limited set of questions (MBE, MEE, MPT) to jurisdictions for an emergency remote testing option for local admission during the COVID-19 crisis,” but that this remote testing option would not take place until October 5–6, 2020, after all three UBE administrations had occurred.¹⁸ We shifted our Summer 2020 Essay Workshop series online using Zoom and TWEN¹⁹ but created two separate workshop schedules and Zoom sessions to allow the two cohorts to remain separate in their bar exam preparation efforts. This separation became

16. Marsha Griggs, *An Epic Fail*, 64 *How. L.J.* 1, 2 (2020) (providing a critical analysis of the systemic failure of bar licensure authorities to respond adaptively to the COVID-19 pandemic).

17. *Past NCBE COVID-19 Updates*, NAT'L CONF. OF BAR EXAM'RS (Apr. 3, 2020), <http://www.ncbex.org/ncbe-covid-19-updates/past-updates/> [https://perma.cc/FB8W-ARSJ] (announcing that the NCBE would make bar exam materials available for two Fall administrations in 2020: September 9–10 and September 30–October 1, but that each jurisdiction would determine whether to offer the exam in July, in early September, or in late September).

18. *Past NCBE COVID-19 Updates*, NAT'L CONF. OF BAR EXAM'RS (June 1, 2020), <http://www.ncbex.org/ncbe-covid-19-updates/past-updates/> [https://perma.cc/FB8W-ARSJ] (noting that the remote testing option would not constitute a full bar exam or the UBE, so scores earned on this exam would be used only for local admission decisions and would not be eligible to be transferred as UBE or MBE scores to other jurisdictions).

19. The West Education Network® (TWEN) is an online extension of the law school classroom that is utilized by many law schools as a Learning Management System.

increasingly important as stressors unique to each jurisdiction arose at different times throughout the summer, including changing bar exam dates, locations, and security and admission procedures.

As we continued to adapt to the changing bar exam landscape, we turned our sights to Orientation and Fall 2020. The small group sections of Introduction to Legal Studies would not be possible to hold in person due to limited space availability in light of physical distancing requirements. Additionally, the ILS midterm is designed to mimic the 1L final exam experience so students are able to become familiar with exam software in an ungraded environment. As the University had announced that Fall 2020 final exams would take place online, our midterm would also be administered online. With these considerations in mind, we made the decision to shift ILS completely online.

We also decided to shift Advanced Legal Methodology online, but for different reasons. The most basic reason was the concern that the University might need to pivot back to the online model mid-semester due to public health concerns, which might, therefore, happen around the time of ALM's final exam.²⁰ Shifting online would remove any unnecessary confusion that might arise at the end of the course. Additionally, the group of students who populate ALM are often sensitive to their presence in the course, so we wanted to establish an online rapport with those students and allow them to become comfortable meeting with us via Zoom early in the semester so that we could maintain that connection more readily should public health concerns force us to pivot back online as a University.

Having determined that both of our Fall 2020 courses would be offered online, we began the process of re-envisioning these courses in that format. We also spent the summer working on two new online programs that would be offered to the incoming 1Ls as part of the online Orientation 2020. The Assistant

20. See Faith Karimi et al., *Coronavirus Deaths are Expected to Go Down Before a Sharp Rise in September, Model Shows*, CNN HEALTH (June 12, 2020, 8:16 AM), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/11/health/us-coronavirus-thursday/index.html> [https://perma.cc/KT62-HYPM] (describing COVID-19 morbidity and mortality trends in the United States and quoting Dr. Christopher Murray, director of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington School of Medicine, as saying that “[i]f the US is unable to check the growth in September, we could be facing worsening trends in October, November and the following months if the pandemic, as we expect, follows pneumonia seasonality.”); Teresa Valerio Parrot & Erin Hennessy, *Bracing for a Fall*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (July 1, 2020), <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/07/01/if-colleges-have-change-their-fall-plans-they-must-communicate-care-fully-preserve> [https://perma.cc/ZCR4-ES5W] (discussing how circumstances may force colleges to shift their current plans for Fall 2020); Lilah Burke, *COVID-19 Roundup: Outbreaks and iPads*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (July 27, 2020), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/27/covid-19-roundup-universities-see-outbreaks-online-semesters-and-free-ipads> [https://perma.cc/3ZJH-M24J] (describing how, even before the Fall 2020 semester begins, some institutions are reporting COVID-19 outbreaks on their campuses, and more universities are adjusting their Fall 2020 plans for offering in-person classes).

Director and I worked with our Director of Inclusion and Diversity Education to help develop a new First Generation program for the incoming class, which includes asynchronous online modules covering issues such as stereotype threat, imposter syndrome, isolation, and the different ways the ARC can help 1Ls transition into the law school community. The Assistant Director and I also created Gateway to 1L. Gateway to 1L is an asynchronous program that provides 1Ls with a common background and understanding of the sources of law, the structure of the American legal system, and what it means to think and read like a lawyer. Gateway to 1L also introduces the 1L courses so students have a better understanding of 1L course content and the relationship of the courses to one another.

In all our course and program development, we kept the mission of building community between ourselves and the students, as well as between the students themselves, close in mind. We were also conscious of the need to give the ARC a freestanding online presence, separate and apart from the physical ARC space, so students would not lose access to our programs or materials should the University pivot online at any point in the semester. Lastly, we kept the accessibility of our courses and programs front and center, particularly considering the expanding meaning of accessibility, beyond traditional academic accommodation concerns to now include questions of technological, time, and space concerns, among others.

III. BUILDING COMMUNITY IN A VIRTUAL SPACE

A. *Building Relationships with Students*

In academic support, a lot of what we do is build relationships. We build trust and rapport with our students. We build a sense of community both within and outside of our classrooms. Prior to COVID-19, most of my programming was a mixture of different types of close encounters, and by close encounters, I mean the kind that could no longer happen in person and comply with public health physical distancing requirements. My typical day was filled with one-on-one meetings with students, reviewing study aids or exam answers or answering questions about the bar exam, sometimes while they played with the fidget toys I keep on my desk or helped themselves to a piece of candy or tissue, always as we sat across my three-foot-wide desk, often with the door closed for privacy. In the classroom, my exercises regularly required students to get up and move around the room, getting into small groups of two to three students to draft answers or review each other's written work. A hallmark of ILS was the small group sessions of ten to twelve 1Ls gathering to apply the academic skills we covered in class. Even my summer bar exam preparation workshops sought to connect students to one another, particularly as so many of them were engaged in online bar exam preparation programs, and my workshops were one of the few times they saw me or fellow bar takers each week.

Fast forward to classes going online, as well as all law school committee meetings taking place over Zoom and cultivating a sense of community became a priority about which we had to be very intentional. The one-on-one connection with students was the easiest to shift online because it is easy to do one-on-one coaching or mentoring in Zoom or other platforms. Assuming the student has a stable internet connection and compatible hardware, the screen sharing function on Zoom allows me to review documents with students and walk them through recommended exercises as though we were sitting across from each other in my office. Zoom also makes it easy to maintain eye contact with the student and allows me to provide personalized attention—and make that individualized connection.

These one-on-one meetings were especially important in supporting my bar exam takers. Just as they had during the end of the Spring 2020 semester, many of these students were continuing to face time constraints, space constraints, technology constraints, and resource constraints that had not been part of their planned bar exam preparation experience just a few short months earlier. Some students were facing additional caretaking responsibilities or sharing living spaces that were now simultaneously serving as work and classroom spaces. Internet connections that used to serve one or two devices at a time were now taxed with multiple users with much higher bandwidth demands, often on networks that were themselves experiencing a spike in demand. Many students found themselves without their part-time or full-time job, and thus with much more limited financial resources. These new and challenging parameters within which their bar exam preparation had to exist meant that these students were left struggling to concentrate on their preparation materials for meaningful periods of time, and were left without the ability to unwind and engage in the level of self-care needed to properly prepare for such a taxing exam as the bar exam.

Few students directly emailed to ask to meet or have me call them, but whenever I saw an email longer than a few sentences, I intentionally emailed back asking if the student would like to set up a Zoom chat so we could talk about the questions “in person.” Every student to whom I issued such an offer quickly responded that they would love to do so, and these Zoom chats often ended up serving as part information session and part socialization session, giving them a much-needed dose of human interaction with someone outside of their own living space. These students were feeling even more isolated than typical bar preppers because they had been physically separated from their cohort for at least two months now and would likely not see each other in person until the day of the exam.

To help recreate some sense of community among our bar preppers, we decided to host our Essay Workshop series synchronously using Zoom. Each week, at a set time, we offered students the opportunity to come “into” our Zoom classroom and take that week’s assigned essay or performance test under proctored conditions, whereby we shared our screen showing a clock and told

students when to begin and end their practice exam. We then offered a thirty-minute break between the exam writing and the exam review, during which time we offered open office hours, again, at a specific time so students who chose not to attend the exam writing portion could still attend the open office hours. These office hours were a chance for students to ask questions about bar exam preparation, but also for us to chat with them about “normal” things like where to get the best curbside pizza or who had the best ice cream in town. Reminding them that there was life outside of the bar exam and giving them a chance to laugh for a few minutes, even if only at a funny story about my three-year-old during quarantine, allowed them to relax and connect again to both our program, and their peers. After thirty minutes, we would begin the exam review portion of the workshop, but just as in the physical classroom, we were intentional in lingering after the session in our Zoom classroom so that students could wait for the others to drop off before turning their cameras on and asking questions. This virtual replication of a physical opportunity allowed me to identify which students often had questions that they did not want to raise in front of the group, while also allowing the students the opportunity to connect with me individually without having to take the step to reach out via email or phone.

Our summer workshop experience fed meaningfully into our ongoing preparations to welcome the incoming 1Ls to our law school and to our academic support program. Intentional engagement had been key with our bar preppers, and those had been students with whom I had spent three to four years developing a relationship in person. Now my Assistant Director and I were preparing to build relationships with students whom we had not yet met in person and would not be stopping into the ARC to grab a piece of candy or borrow a study aid next semester. Our first step in building relationships with those students was to get our faces and voices in front of the incoming 1Ls earlier and more often. When the First Generation program was rolled out to the incoming 1Ls, we followed the initial email with an open Zoom call invitation for later that week. This Zoom call allowed us to meet students who identified with, or were just interested in, the First Generation program, and also allowed incoming students to see our faces and hear our voices, and ask their questions in a live format. We were able to dispel some of their early fears about law school and provide assuring words to clear up some of their basic questions, removing some of the mystique from the 1L experience and making them more comfortable with the experience.

With Gateway to 1L, the main goal of the program was to provide students with background knowledge to support their 1L studies and make their transition to law school smoother. However, the added benefit to our academic support program was to, again, put our names, faces, and voices, in front of the students well before the semester began, and begin to build those relationships with the students. The introduction to the Gateway to 1L program came directly from me via email allowing students to have my email address readily on hand before the

semester began. I also made the first module an introduction video which featured me, sitting in my office, speaking directly to them from across my desk, just as I would have had they been in my office.

Through Gateway to 1L, we also intentionally began to model to incoming students how they would need to approach their law school classes to further smooth their transition to law school. Gateway to 1L was housed on the TWEN platform, providing students with the opportunity to become familiar with the Learning Management System²¹ that would be utilized in many of their 1L courses. Each module contained Module Videos, along with Module Handouts for students to complete while watching the videos, thus working to keep students' attention on the task even when learning online. We also provided Reference Worksheets for students to complete after watching the video, which allowed students to synthesize out the key points from the video that they could then keep close by to reference during their first few weeks of classes. Both the Module Handouts and the Reference Worksheets were provided in a fillable PDF document so that students could either print them out and complete them by hand, or type their answers into the PDFs, thus allowing them to explore which method led them to retain more from the experience. Lastly, each module concluded with a Module Quiz, which allowed students to apply and verify their understanding of the material but did not count academically, similarly to how we encourage them to utilize study aids to apply what they are learning in class to new hypothetical situations. Each of these components was intended to make students more familiar with an otherwise unfamiliar program of study, smoothing their transition into law school while making them more comfortable and connected with our program.

To provide one final opportunity to interact on a more personal level with the incoming class, we offered a Gateway to 1L Zoom session to introduce me and my Assistant Director, along with the ARC, and provide a space for incoming 1Ls to ask questions regarding the Gateway to 1L modules. We also used this Zoom session as an opportunity for us to get to know our incoming 1Ls, asking them to share with us in the chat where they were joining us from and which section they had been assigned for the Fall semester. As my Assistant Director is originally from St. Louis and I am not a native-St. Louisan, I shared some insights with the students about the unique flavors of the different St. Louis neighborhoods, talked with local students via the chat function about the best

21. Noam Ebner, "Next Week, You Will Teach Your Courses Online": A Reassuring Introduction to Pandemic Pedagogy, *MEDIATE.COM* (Mar. 10, 2020), <https://www.mediate.com/articles/ebner-pandemic-pedagogy.cfm> [<https://perma.cc/3LPA-DBWK>] (describing the Learning Management System (LMS), which includes commercial platforms such as Blackboard and Canvas, as "the place where you meet your students, interact with them, provide them learning material, receive their assignments, and grade them. Students will know to come 'there' to participate. The LMS will provide methods for you to be in contact with all of the students enrolled in your course, as a group or individually.").

place to get BBQ in St. Louis, and explained the key difference between frozen custard and ice cream, something residents of St. Louis take very seriously.²² Over a month out from classes beginning, the incoming class had already had two synchronous opportunities to interact with our program and multiple asynchronous opportunities to interact with our program and methods online.

For the ILS and ALM courses, we worked within TWEN to create a welcoming and supportive online presence. Each week, we prepared a short video that explained what we would be working on that week. Recognizing the added distractions in students' lives, we created video user guides for the course TWEN pages and built reminders into the course modules for deadlines. We have worked to flip the classroom in both courses, allowing our synchronous class time to be spent engaged in active learning activities in breakout rooms so that we could pop between the breakout rooms just as we would walk between small groups had we been in the physical classroom. Our goal with all of these tools was to keep the connection with our students so we could continue to build that relationship such that they continue to reach out to us not just this year, but in the coming years, as well.

Lastly, we were intentional in engaging on the SLU Law social media platforms more heavily. By giving more regular touches and thinking outside the box, our goal was to make more personal connections with students that allowed them to get to know us better. For example, during Spring 2020 final exams, my seven-year-old son and I did an Instagram Live cooking demonstration for the SLU Law Instagram account. The ARC was always popular for the homemade baked goods I would bring in to share with the students, particularly after my son and I had baked that weekend. So, leading up to the event, students were invited to vote on whether we should make our homemade hummus or salsa, or go the baking route and share our famous chocolate chip cookie recipe. Eighty percent of the students voted for the cookies, so we gave them a study break from final exams by walking them through the recipe, which was also shared in advance so they could bake along with us if they wanted to. My son and I had a blast, we were able to give shout outs to students who participated in the live chat, and the students were able to connect with me on a personal level in a non-academic setting.

B. Building Relationships Between Students

Just as important as creating connections between ourselves and the individual students, it was important for us to facilitate students connecting with one another. Our first opportunities to do that arose in our First Generation and

22. Kayla Wheeler, *Where to Get Frozen Custard in the St. Louis Area, Besides Ted Drewes*, 5 ON YOUR SIDE (Aug. 15, 2019, 1:21 PM), <https://www.ksdk.com/article/entertainment/dining/whats-cookin-in-the-lou/where-to-get-frozen-custard-in-the-st-louis-area-besides-ted-drewes-draft/63-b0e00616-aacf-4e4c-a98b-a3b4e6274653> [<https://perma.cc/VPU2-EVDH>].

Gateway to 1L Zoom sessions. In addition to getting to know the incoming 1Ls better ourselves, these sessions provided a great chance to connect the students with each other, as well. During the Gateway to 1L Zoom session, when we asked the students to post their assigned sections into the chat, we also explained to students how they could save the chat so they could look back and see which names were associated with which section. Following the Gateway to 1L Zoom session, we posted a welcome message to the incoming class's private Facebook group page and invited them to comment with their assigned section so they could begin to connect with fellow section members prior to the beginning of the semester. That post received seventy-seven comments and was seen by 169 participants, leading to one incoming 1L creating a poll to connect section mates and a flurry of GroupMe text messaging groups for the individual sections to pop up on the Facebook page later that same day.

We continued to facilitate those connections in our ILS and ALM courses during the Fall semester. First, we created discussion boards to serve as a place for students to introduce themselves to the class, provide feedback to one another on ideas and writing, and collect student questions in a common space so that they could see that they were not alone in their confusion on a topic. These discussion boards also allowed us to directly respond to student questions and ideas, creating the bonus of more professor-student connection.

We also utilized the Zoom breakout room function. These breakout rooms allowed us to break students into small groups so they could effectively engage with each other, allowing for active learning and discussion to continue without students sitting next to one another in a physical classroom. Students could work as partners or small groups to synthesize course materials and collaborate on exercises.²³ Google Docs, a favorite tool of ours for collaborative work when we were in the physical classroom, easily translates to the online classroom via the Zoom screen share function, or by allowing students to follow along in the Google Doc itself. Google Docs is a free application for creating and editing files with real-time collaboration, so just as you might have had students go up to the board to add their contribution, they can similarly take turns adding their answers to the shared Google Doc.²⁴

Within Zoom, you can build community even further by engaging and connecting with students through the renaming function. By allowing students to rename themselves with their preferred name or preferred pronouns, you can

23. Quentin Huff, Associate Director of Bar Success, Wake Forest University, and Natalie Rodriguez, Assistant Dean of Academic Success, Southwestern University, Presentation at the Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law ASP Virtual Webinar: Lessons Learned from Pre-COVID Online Teaching (May 1, 2020), https://sharkmedia.nova.edu/media/Edited+ASP+Conference+Call+-+Lessons+from+Pre-COVID+Online+Teaching/1_q2wt3201 [<https://perma.cc/M32H-CH59>].

24. *Id.*

build community and a sense of belonging.²⁵ You can also get to know your students' personalities and interests by doing theme days, where students change their names to their favorite Supreme Court Justice or a different pop culture theme.²⁶ These tools allow for the classroom to be more interactive and engaging because we are not simply lecturing the entire time.

Finally, we utilized the Zoom Chat function to promote discussion between students and us, as well as between students and each other, in a discreet manner that might have otherwise been seen as interruptions during a traditional, in-person class. The benefit to this Chat function is that it allows shy students to be more willing to participate and allows students the opportunity to submit questions privately to us.²⁷ It also allowed us to close out class by asking students what the muddiest point was for them in class that day and then save the chat dialogue to review after class so that we could send out an email clarifying information or make a short video addressing the points.

I would be remiss if I highlighted all the benefits of Zoom and this type of synchronous engagement without a word of caution. While synchronous engagement can help build community, it can also break community apart, so it is important to be thoughtful about how we ask our students to engage in our classes. While it is natural to feel that we want to engage with students—and if we see them, we can engage with them by making eye contact—we must be mindful that students make choices about why they are or are not on video. Some students may be in a situation where they do not feel comfortable sharing their background at home. While virtual Zoom backgrounds have become all the rage, my own home computer is not modern enough to allow me to utilize that feature, and I remind myself that my students may share this experience. Moreover, a Zoom background does not drown out the sounds of my three-year-old when he has decided that I have been on the computer too long that day. If faculty want to make it a requirement for students to show themselves, consider sending out advance notice to students and invite them to contact you if they have any concerns about showing themselves. Make sure that you are not forcing students to expose themselves in ways that make them uncomfortable such that they cannot engage with the class, and therefore also might possibly disengage from the law school community.

25. *Id.*

26. Susan Landrum, Assistant Dean for the Academic Success and Professionalism Program, Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law, Presentation at the Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law ASP Virtual Webinar: Lessons Learned from Pre-COVID Online Teaching (May 1, 2020), https://sharkmedia.nova.edu/media/Edited+ASP+Conference+Call+-+Lessons+from+Pre-COVID+Online+Teaching/1_q2wt3201 [https://perma.cc/M32H-CH59].

27. Rowana Miller, *Long Live the Zoom Class Chat*, SLATE (Oct. 8, 2020, 12:39 PM), <https://slate.com/technology/2020/10/long-live-zoom-class-chat-remote-learning.html> [https://perma.cc/E74J-FQ5D].

IV. TRANSLATING A PHYSICAL SPACE INTO AN ONLINE PRESENCE

Just as important as re-envisioning how we would build community within our programs and courses, we also knew that we needed to translate our physical space into an online presence. Depending on the scope of the academic support program at a law school, the physical space can range anywhere from a single person's office to an entire suite of offices and library shelves. The SLU Law ARC is an awesome space that has been carefully cultivated over the years to draw students in and normalize asking for academic resources and support. In Spring 2020, when law school classes went online and students were sheltering in place, students no longer had access to the resources they relied upon in the ARC.

Over Summer 2020, we explored the pros and cons of using TWEN and Blackboard to house the online ARC and settled on Blackboard because it allowed for more visual elements to be incorporated into the design. This was important to us because we wanted the ability to shift not just the contents of our physical space, but also the culture of the ARC. Blackboard allowed us to incorporate the visual aspects that made the ARC welcoming and accessible to many of the students. For example, several years ago I began an annual ARC Halloween Coloring Contest to introduce students to the benefits of coloring to help combat stress and anxiety.²⁸ The visual aspects of Blackboard allowed us to continue this contest tradition in an online format, by inviting students to post photos of themselves engaged in a self-care activity. Not only did this allow other students to gather ideas for new self-care activities, but it also introduced 1Ls that were new, themselves, to the St. Louis region to different self-care opportunities in the area, creating that sense of community that we used to provide in person. We even embraced the new pandemic-life by having the traditional basket of fall baked goods delivered to the winner through a local business who had switched to delivery and carry-out options.

Now, all of this is not to say that making the switch from TWEN to Blackboard was fast or easy. Many of us likely have experienced a significant learning curve when it comes to technology in the past few months. Learning how to set up Blackboard sites to be visually appealing, practicing sharing screens on Zoom to move side-by-side work to an online format, and exploring the availability and extent of online study aids in our law library's subscriptions, all take time. However, the beauty of this work is that so much of it can be front loaded, and when thoughtfully designed, this online space can serve as a self-directed tool for students to support their own studies. In addition to the resources that used to be available on the shelves of the ARC, this online space allows us to post a calendar of ongoing programming, link to the CALI academic

28. See Shainna Ali, *Are Adult Coloring Books Actually Helpful?* PSYCH. TODAY (Mar. 27, 2018), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/modern-mentality/201803/are-adult-coloring-books-actually-helpful> [https://perma.cc/AA85-ZEPG].

success lessons, link directly to online study aids available through our library, provide asynchronous modules on general academic support and bar exam preparation topics for students to access year-round, provide customizable study schedules and exam schedules for students to download, and link directly to other information on the SLU Law website, such as the 1L exam schedule.

The shift to an online ARC also meant a shift to online office hours using Zoom. Our Zoom office hours are posted to the Blackboard page, along with a link to our respective personal Zoom meeting rooms. We have enabled the waiting room function on our Zoom meeting rooms to protect the privacy of the students with whom we are meeting and are able to keep track of how many students are waiting on us to gauge the amount of time we spend with any particular student. Online scheduling tools such as Calendly and YouCanBook.me provide the added function of allowing students to schedule meetings with us outside of traditional office hours and receive an automatic Zoom invite in response.

V. BUILDING ONLINE COURSES AND ADAPTING TO THE EXPANDING MEANING OF “ACCESSIBLE”

As discussed earlier, the circumstances surrounding the conclusion of the Spring 2020 semester, along with the ever-changing bar exam preparation period during Summer 2020, illustrated the additional stressors that our students were experiencing, not to mention the technological, time, and space concerns that were limiting their ability to fully engage in law school. While traditional academic accommodations continued to be at the front of our minds when adapting our programs and courses to the online format,²⁹ we also took very seriously these additional concerns that were affecting our students’ ability to participate in the way they, and we, were used to them participating pre-COVID.

Initially, this became a question of whether to present our material synchronously or asynchronously. Our academic support and bar prep classes

29. When designing an online course, it is imperative that accommodated students are kept in mind and the course be made compatible with the most basic classroom-style accommodations. For example, any videos should be imported into a software that provides closed-captioning (we used Panopto and YouTube); images should be narrated for students who have an issue with being able to see things on a screen; clear and consistent layouts when presenting content, built-in designs and layouts in the presentation software, and high-contrast color combinations and use of large, bold fonts on uncluttered pages with plain backgrounds, etc. should be utilized. These accommodations should be anticipated and planned for from the beginning of the online course’s design. This new course preparation should be embraced as an opportunity to make courses accessible from the start. See Sheryl Burgstahler, *ADA Compliance for Online Course Design*, EDUCAUSE REV. (Jan. 30, 2017), <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2017/1/ada-compliance-for-online-course-design> [<https://perma.cc/7X3R-U8SA>]; Sheryl Burgstahler, *20 Tips for Teaching an Accessible Online Course*, DO-IT (June 20, 2019), <https://www.washington.edu/doi/20-tips-teaching-accessible-online-course> [<https://perma.cc/SXU6-DCF9>].

are typically very interactive, with many in-class exercises and group work, plus feedback from peers and the professor. These exercises typically lend themselves better to synchronous learning than asynchronous learning. Additionally, with synchronous classes, students are better able to gauge the amount of time they will spend on our course in a week, and they can see other students' faces and our faces to better engage with us during class. However, class length and assigned time slot in the daily schedule becomes an issue for students with synchronous classes because of Zoom fatigue.³⁰ Students struggle with long periods of lecture online, making it important for faculty to break up lectures and build in regular exercises (such as those discussed above using Zoom break out rooms), ask questions through polling, or utilize chat functions. And we discovered through the synchronous summer Essay Workshop Series that, even though a class may take place on Zoom, it is important for us to show up early and linger after class, to chat with students and answer questions before and after class, just as we would have in a physical classroom. Beyond supporting our students' learning efforts, these efforts also supported our building and maintaining relationships with those students.

While our courses most readily lend themselves to synchronous learning, we decided that our ideal model was a combination of asynchronous work, shifting the lecture portion of the class to the student to complete prior to class, and synchronous work, allowing for group work to be done during class via Zoom breakout rooms. By flipping the classroom, we can utilize online modules with embedded videos and quizzes to ensure that students are exposed to the content that is most important to our synchronous class session. Our summer experience creating the First Generation and Gateway to IL videos taught us to first identify the content goals for each video, and then storyboard our content by writing out a script before making the visual components. The script also served two additional purposes: First, the script allowed us to find natural breaks in the content of the video so we could break the videos into shorter videos that were a maximum of five to seven minutes in length. These shorter videos were better at keeping the students' attention than a longer format of video. Additionally, the script provided us with an easy way to both check the automated captions created when we uploaded the video to either Panopto or YouTube, as well as provide a written transcript of the video to a student who might benefit from it for accommodation purposes. Housing these videos and our related materials on TWEN also allowed us to monitor student attendance and participation. We could see which students had logged into the TWEN page,

30. See Mary Meisenzahl, *What It Feels Like to Experience Zoom Burnout and How to Avoid It*, BUS. INSIDER (June 20, 2020), <https://www.businessinsider.com/zoom-burnout-video-call-fatigue-from-work-and-school-2020-5> [<https://perma.cc/WSR6-FWL4>] (describing the experience of Zoom burnout).

who had watched the videos through Panopto, and how long students had spent watching each video.

We also learned to be very conscious of how we provided material to students. Many students did not have printers at home when we shifted to online learning in Spring 2020. They were used to having access to the law school computer lab or the printer in the law school library. Without access to those printer options, students were left reading materials on screens and were unable to annotate those documents. As a result, when we created the Module Handouts and Module Reference Worksheets for Gateway to 1L, we learned how to create fillable PDFs so that students had the option of either printing the materials out and writing the answers in by hand, or, if they did not have access to a printer, they could still engage with the material and type their answers into the PDF.

Learning how to adapt our print materials to an online format, and how to teach our students to use online materials, became even more important as more state bar exams shifted to the NCBE's October 2020 remote testing opportunity. States like Illinois announced rules surrounding this online bar exam format, including that applicants were not allowed to have any papers, notes, or writing implements of any kind, in their vicinity during the exam.³¹ That meant that we needed to shift our ongoing Essay Workshop Series for those alumni to mirror that experience. Even if alumni had access to a printer, they should not print out practice materials because they would not be able to do so on the October exam, nor would they be able to mark up the MEE or MPT packet in the way we had previously practiced with them. Jurisdictions were not yet providing any specifics about how the exam software would simultaneously present the question and answer spaces on the applicant's computer screen, so we were left to instruct alumni participants to do a side-by-side screen layout for the PDF of our workshop MEE or MPT and the participant's Microsoft Word document in which they would be typing their answer. This experience in adapting our Essay Workshop Series informed our redesign of our fall classes because ILS gave students a midterm opportunity so they would become familiar with the online final exam experience. Also, ALM was an early MPT preparation, so teaching these students to become more flexible in how they interacted with the MPT packet became a necessary part of preparing them for the MPT.

Creating fillable PDF lecture handouts also allowed us to support students staying on task while they watched our videos and relieve the pressure of their having to take detailed notes, so they could focus on the content instead. We also built in quizzes after each module to assess the students' understanding of the material, and made sure to include explanations that were unique to each answer choice, so that students could use the quiz as a learning opportunity, not just an

31. *Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for the Illinois Bar Examination Scheduled for October 5–6, 2020*, ILL. BD. OF ADMISSIONS TO THE BAR, <https://www.ilbaradmissions.org/faq-il-remote-oct> [<https://perma.cc/UKV6-PMUR>].

assessment. With our ongoing course design, we moved these quizzes into the videos themselves, using Panopto, so we had the benefit of keeping the student on task at the same time we assessed their understanding of the information.

Through our summer immersion in online teaching courses, we learned new ways to engage students and create an interactive online classroom experience, even in a fully, or partially, asynchronous learning environment. These tools were key to our Fall 2020 course design because, even with synchronous work, we needed to remember that some students might still have an inability to participate in synchronous sessions due to bad internet connections, or caretaking responsibilities, whether those are ongoing or arise suddenly before class. Moreover, these concerns are not limited to synchronous learning, but can also affect asynchronous learning, because having access to the appropriate technology impacts a student's ability to access our online materials, and the presence of children in the student's home, or of other caretaking responsibilities, may also affect a student's ability to focus, and therefore, to learn.

We continued to storyboard our videos to ensure they came in at ten minutes or less, chunking the information we were presenting to students so they could engage with the class in short time slots throughout the day. We also began to utilize the Discussion Board feature on TWEN, creating an Introduction discussion board thread for our students to introduce themselves to the class and allow us to individually respond and welcome them. We created a Q&A Discussion Board thread where students could post their questions and review our answer to their question, along with other student questions, because not all students would have the opportunity for immediate feedback to a question during the synchronous class session. We also created a script that we read at the beginning of each Zoom session so students would understand that we were recording the class session and that all chats, even those that are labeled as private, would be saved to the recording so that students who were unable to attend class could review both the video and the chat log to pick up what they had missed.

We updated the attendance and participation policies in our syllabi to set our expectations, and provided an explicit communication strategy for students when they encountered difficulty meeting those expectations. The traditional law school experience, where a student is sitting in a physical classroom, provides a structure to students that disappears when everything moves online. Ideally, online learning requires students to develop routines and a method for moving from task to task. Time management can become a new issue for students who did not struggle with it before the shift online. And for some students, it is not a question of time management, but that they are facing different technology, time, and location challenges when they try to connect with our class, either synchronously or asynchronously. For these reasons, we made clear our expectation that students should not wait to complete assignments right

before a deadline. We also provided students with the contact information for resources in Student Services and Information Technology to help guide them to resources that could help them get their needs met.

CONCLUSION

Spring 2020 and the 2020–2021 academic year are now behind us. While the COVID-19 pandemic continues to surround us, affecting so many aspects of our daily lives and those of our students, we are no longer in emergency teaching mode. Summer 2020 provided us with the opportunity to immerse ourselves in online teaching pedagogy and methods, to reflect on what worked and what didn't work in the spring, and to look ahead to the possibilities of Fall 2020. I entered Summer 2020 overwhelmed by all that lay ahead, both for the summer and the fall. But as each week passed, I became more and more excited about the new and better ways I was learning to deliver content and information to my students. The silver lining to our communal experience is the positive, long-term effect this can have on our classes. Because of our thoughtful design, much of what we worked so hard to create for that new online 2020–2021 academic experience can be maintained or translated back into a physical classroom this coming Fall.

