

ONLINE LEARNING: EXPECTATIONS AND ATTENDANCE

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Our law school community continues to confront special issues brought on by the spread of the coronavirus infection and the public health response to it. The challenge for both faculty and students is to preserve as much as feasible of the regular learning experience. Maintaining normal patterns of behavior contributes to personal well-being, and regular class preparation, attendance, and participation promote student learning and achievement. But online instruction presents unique teaching and learning issues, and this pandemic affects each member of our community in a different way.

In this document, the law school's goal is to harmonize, as much as possible, two goals. The first goal is that both faculty and students exercise care not to make compromises that will jeopardize student preparation for law practice and the bar examination. The second goal is that the law school will make reasonable allowances that recognize the specific, additional challenges that the pandemic may present for different students.

Each of us also must remember that we all – faculty, staff, and students – are attempting to adjust to these unprecedented conditions and must be understanding of the situations of others. This will require empathy, patience, and care for the well-being of all.

Indeed, all of us have the same desire: for students to learn what is necessary to graduate law school, to pass the bar examination, to find suitable employment, and to become successful attorneys. Working together in good faith, we can succeed in achieving this end even under these difficult conditions.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this documents is to provide a series of expectations for all of us that will maximize the learning experience while allowing for reasonable accommodations for those affected by the coronavirus. Very likely, not every issue has been addressed, and further updates are possible as circumstances warrant.

GENERAL EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS IN ONLINE LEARNING

Students should:

- Strive to attend every regularly scheduled online class meeting just as they would in-person classes. Students must attend 80% of the regularly scheduled class sessions for the semester (including both previous in-person classes as well as online classes going forward (and in-person classes going forward, should the law school be able to resume them)).
- Sign in to each remotely conducted class session before it begins and remain in attendance for the duration of the session.
- Prepare for each class session just as if it were to be conducted in person, participate in the class discussion as directed by their professor, and remain engaged during the entire session. Online class meetings require students to exercise greater self-discipline than do in-person class meetings.
- Participate by video, if feasible, and use the webcam on their computer, tablet, or smartphone. Students should not replace their image with an avatar or move the camera so that they cannot be seen. Being able to see everyone in class is one way to preserve a sense of community and remain engaged with classmates.
- Keep in mind that the instructor and other class participants can see each other. Please wear appropriate clothing and be reflective about behavior during each online class session.
- Remember that we are all part of the South Texas College of Law Houston family and that our faculty and administration care deeply about the welfare of each of our students. Students should reach out to their professors if they experience any difficulties so that the professors can assist or direct the student to the administrative office that best can assist them.

GENERAL EXPECTATIONS FOR FACULTY IN ONLINE LEARNING

Faculty should:

- Conduct all class sessions at their regularly scheduled meeting times. Multiple sections of the same course also should meet at their regularly scheduled times and not in a single, combined class session.
- Predominantly hold class meetings in real time with all students synchronously engaged in the teacher-directed learning experience. Faculty members may exercise their best professional judgment and make judicious use of pre-recorded class sessions or other asynchronous instructional tools as a supplement to, substitute for, or backup to remotely conducted class meetings.
- Record all class sessions conducted over Zoom, and post those recordings on the law school's streaming server. Faculty members who have been posting recorded course materials to some other location may continue to do so, as long as that practice already is well-utilized by students in the course.
- Monitor online class attendance by any reasonable means and continue to maintain a record of student attendance.
- Offer some reasonable alternative to in-person office hours in order to maintain appropriate opportunities for students to communicate about the course.

TEMPORARY ATTENDANCE POLICY FOR ONLINE INSTRUCTION SPRING SEMESTER 2020

The expedited transition to remotely conducted classes as a precautionary response to the spread of the coronavirus infection poses unique issues for class attendance in the distance-learning environment. The purpose of this temporary modification of the law school's attendance policy is to harmonize two goals: (1) to promote regular and punctual student participation in remotely conducted class sessions so as to ensure that students have an opportunity to learn the material presented in class; and (2) to recognize and provide reasonable accommodations for those students who are particularly affected by the public health response to the coronavirus or COVID-19 such that we can avoid having any students dropped from a course on account of absenteeism related to those issues. Please note: The law school will continue to treat absenteeism unrelated to the current public health crisis under the law school's regular attendance policy.

Regarding the first goal, while the law school conducts classes remotely, the regular class attendance policy remains in effect, subject to the modification set forth below. Under that policy, the law school expects students to make every effort to attend 100 percent of regularly scheduled classes, and students are required to attend at least 80 percent of all regularly scheduled classes in each course in order to receive course credit. As applied to the current situation, for remotely conducted classes, attendance means participating contemporaneously in the class session when it takes place. Students must sign in to the remotely conducted class session when it begins, remain in attendance until the class session is adjourned, and participate in session discussions as required by the instructor.

The law school will monitor student class attendance in two ways. First, faculty members will continue to maintain attendance records and may employ, at their discretion, any reasonable method for monitoring student attendance in remotely conducted classes. Second, all students taking a final examination will be required to sign a statement that he or she has attended at least 80 percent of the classes regularly scheduled for the course. A student's false declaration regarding attendance is an act of academic misconduct, subjecting the student to expulsion, suspension, or other discipline, as well as to the reporting of that misconduct to the Texas Board of Legal Examiners or its equivalent in another jurisdiction.

Regarding the second goal, we will be modifying the law school's regular attendance policy, which ordinarily does not allow professors to have discretion to change attendance requirements. As long as classes are conducted remotely, that limitation will be modified in the following way:

A faculty member shall permit a student who is unable to attend a remotely-conducted class session to make up that absence by viewing the recording of that session, provided that the student's absence is due to the student's coronavirus-related illness; the coronavirus-related illness of someone in the student's household or for whom the student has caretaking responsibility; any reason directly related to an employer's, school's, or child- or health-care facility's public health efforts in response to the coronavirus or COVID-19; or some other circumstance related to the coronavirus pandemic not of the student's own making and outside of the student's control.

The student must provide the faculty member with notice of and an explanation for the absence by email before the class session takes place or within 24 hours after the session concludes, unless emergency conditions prevent timely notice. The faculty member may require the student to verify his or her viewing of the recorded class session by any reasonable method, including the use of "Easter eggs" (*i.e.*, a word, message, or image embedded in the class recording that the student viewing the recording can report), a short quiz over the class session, or a brief student summary of the covered material.