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How to Survive Virtual Law School and Maintain Your Sanity

by Shelley Awe | March 16, 2020

With most law schools now conducting classes remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, law students are left wondering how to navigate this strange new mode of legal education. If you're one of the many law students trying to adjust to a new internet-based classroom, we've compiled some tips for you—not only on how to set yourself up for success, but also on how to stay sane in a classroom of one. Plus, we've rounded up answers to a few common questions students have been asking in recent days.

Tips for Succeeding as a Virtual Law Student:

Familiarize yourself with the technology. Whether your professors are using Zoom, Blackboard, Google hangouts, or some other program to run classes, familiarize yourself with the technology before signing in live for the first time. Make sure to include the video, sound, and chat functionalities in your self-learning sessions—all of these features may come into play during class.

Keep it professional. Being remote doesn't mean you can do whatever you want on your end of the computer. You don't want to find yourself in an embarrassing situation—a very real risk in a technology-based class. Operate with the mentality that you might be asked to participate at any moment via sound or video (yes, virtual cold calls are a thing). Before class starts, consider your outfit, location, and whether there is background noise. If you'd be embarrassed for your professor or classmates to see or hear anything happening on your end, fix it before logging on. Pro tip: Be aware that some programs—like Zoom—have settings that allow your professors to keep tabs on you, including whether you've "left class" for a different web browser. Save the online shopping for after class.

Maintain communication with your professor. Just because you can't go up to your professor after class or drop by office hours doesn't mean you can't still ask your questions. Reach out to professors by email or phone, or attend virtual office hours if they're hosting them. (If they aren't, you might want to ask if this is something they'd consider.) Don't let distance keep you from getting the answers you would seek out if you were still present on campus.

Keep your routine as consistent as possible. In class, did you take notes on your laptop or by hand? Did you come prepared with full case briefs, or just some highlighting in your textbook? Don't stop using the methods you were using before and worked well for you. Also, continue with your preferred study strategies like outlining, brook-briefing, making flash cards, etc. Try to maintain as much of your class preparation routine as possible.

Don't get distracted. If your TV is on in the background, you're blasting music, or you're participating in a virtual drinking game during class, then you're not soaking up the information like you should be. Ask yourself: If I were physically present at school, how would I be behaving right now? Just because you're now in the comfort of home doesn't mean you have less information to learn or your finals will be less rigorous. This is still law school, and you need to focus.

Tips for Maintaining Your Sanity:

Get dressed. There is truly something to be said for putting on a real outfit before starting school work and classes for the day. Now that you don't have a commute, this transition from sweats to jeans (or whatever your outfit of choice may be) can serve as the "home" and "school" barrier that signals your day is starting.

Use a dedicated work space to study and attend class. Similarly, keep a dedicated work space that is clean, well lit, and separate from your bed or couch. If possibly, only use this space for studying and participating in classes. Like getting dressed for the day, your transition to sitting in this spot serves as a signal that it is time to focus.

Maintain communication with your classmates. You'll probably come to find that you miss the camaraderie and presence of your law school classmates. To fill that void, maintain contact with them. Whether that's by starting a group chat with a few close friends or creating a social media page for your entire section, a line of communication to complain about readings, commiserate about how lonely you are, or send law school memes will go a long way in reducing feelings of isolation.

Set up remote study groups. If you work well in study groups, the transition to remote classes doesn't mean that has to end. Try using the same technology being used for classes to set up video sessions with classmates. Just make sure that if you are counting these sessions as study time, you are in fact studying and not just chatting.

Get up and get out. Fit some form of movement into your day to break up the monotony of sitting alone. Get up every hour and stretch. Get outside for a quick walk or bike ride throughout the day for some fresh air (following all applicable health precautions). Get an at-home workout in. Keeping active throughout the day will boost your mood and help you refocus when you return to your study space.

A Few FAQ's and What We Know

1 – How will final exams work now?

Obviously, we can't speak for all law schools, but many students will likely be taking their final exams in a take-home format this semester. This may not be how your exam was supposed to be offered, and it may be a new method of exam-taking for you, but don't panic! Lots of law students have survived take-home exams, as this mode of testing is the norm for some schools and professors. Stay tuned for upcoming advice from us on how to tackle take-home exams.

2 – What about the ABA rules about in-person class attendance?

ABA guidance does allow law schools to take reasonable steps in emergency situations, as long as the integrity of legal education is maintained. So your school can't just cancel classes for the rest of the semester and call it a day, but remote classes are considered to be a valid solution. The ABA guidance even states that "[d]istance learning often may be a good solution to emergencies or disasters that make the law school facilities unavailable or make it difficult or impossible for students to get to the law school."

3 – What do I do if I left my textbooks at school and am not allowed to go get them or I'm located too far away from my school?

Many textbooks are available online in eBook format, so try this route first. Some textbooks include the digital version for free with purchase of the hard copy, so you may already have this access. We have also confirmed with West Academic that they are offering students free digital versions of the textbooks they can longer access in hard copy. If you can't get ahold of a digital copy of your textbook, ask a TA or classmate to scan the relevant pages for you.

Do you have other questions related to law school closures or remote classes that you want answers to? Email me at sawe@vault.com, and we'll look into it.