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Law Students, COVID-19, and Big Feelings

Posted on [September 1, 2021](#) by [Olivia Smith Schlinck](#)

It's Fall 2021 and well . . . we're back. Or rather – some of us are. Along with a patchwork of universities requiring vaccinations and/or masks for students comes a patchwork of modes of instruction: fully online, hybrid, fully in-person (and subject to change). Some employees have shifted to occasional work-from-home models while others are required to be in-person every day. It's all very complicated. Honestly, right now *everything* is complicated. With big, complicated situations come big, complicated feelings, and our students' feelings are certainly that: big.

At this point in the pandemic, big feelings from students are not new. We've had a year and a half of instruction largely online while an ever-changing world loomed overhead, bringing with it the initial unknowns of the COVID-19 pandemic, the loneliness of stay-at-home orders, the frustration of a worsening pandemic, the joys of a nation reopening, the general uncertainty and anxiety and unease. Now, we add to the mix a (at least partially) reopened law school. How will this play out?

To start, more than half of the student body – all the 1Ls and many, if not all, of the 2Ls – have likely never been onto campus or in the library. Students will get lost, or accidentally miss a class, or walk into the wrong classroom in the middle of a lecture. 1Ls will feel the normal first-day feelings of confusion, excitement, nervousness, frustration, embarrassment, exhaustion, and possibly regret. 2Ls may feel the same, coupled with some amount of remorse, perhaps, for a 1L year lost to Zoom.

For better or worse, at this point most students are used to Zoom. They are used to Zoom school, to Zoom exams, to Zoom attendance, and Zoom recordings to review. They are used to signing into class from their bed. They are used to professors offering more flexible policies on attendance, grades, and exams.

Adjusting to a world without Zoom will be a challenge. Students might be frustrated. They might be angry that the old policies they liked are no longer in effect. They might miss going to class in their pajamas. They might be annoyed at masked and muffled voices in the classroom.

And then there is the added layer of COVID-19 itself. Students may be worried about mask policies or afraid of getting sick. They may live with young children or immunocompromised people and be concerned about passing them the virus. They may feel anxious about simply being around so many *people* after a year and a half of relative isolation.

Of course, students may also be excited. Excited to be back in-person; thrilled to be in law school; relieved to be free of Zoom; eager for a new internship or to take a cool course or to have a study group again.

Chances are, students are feeling any of the above, all at once, even if one feeling seems to contradict another. Feelings don't have to make sense. Feelings can be complicated.

The point is that our students are feeling *a lot*. Library workers are often the first to face a student and their feelings, and these emotions are sure to bubble over into the classroom. A student who seems standoffish may be trying to practice social distancing. A student who is chatty and perhaps disruptive may be ecstatic to be surrounded by classmates. A student who is irritable may be frustrated or disappointed if their in-class experience doesn't meet their expectations.

How do we approach a school year with all these big feelings? The same as we have for the last eighteen months: with kindness and grace. Give your students the benefit of the doubt. Offer flexibility on deadlines. Be more lenient with your lateness and attendance policy. Don't pretend that everything is normal; acknowledge the circumstances of the world. Lend an ear for students who want to vent. Encourage students to prioritize their mental health and point them to the resources that exist to support them.

We did all of this in spring 2020 and throughout the 2020-2021 academic year. Circumstances may have changed, sure, but many of the emotions and fears weighing on our students in March 2020 remain, and so too must our kind and gracious approach. (There is an argument that a kindness approach should always be the default in teaching, but that is a point for another post).

So go out and handle those big feelings – and don't forget to feel them yourself, too.

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