



ESSAY

Connection Reflections: Staying Involved with an Institution While Working Remotely

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The last two years have been unprecedented for most legal skills faculty. Having to flip the legal writing classroom and teach in online Zoom rooms became the norm. Gone were the days of seeing colleagues in the hallway, faculty lounge, or stopping by someone's office. It became harder to stay connected and build relationships. But to a select few, such as myself, the asynchronous and synchronous online teaching modality is where we began. So, beginning to build connections and becoming involved in service to the law school and the community had to be done virtually as well. In a post-pandemic world, where legal instruction and court proceedings are becoming increasingly hybrid, connection to students, faculty, and staff remains an important issue. As hard as it sounds, building connections remotely actually worked, and bonus – led to a good work-life balance. The lessons I learned may be useful to everyone teaching legal skills in this increasingly remote or hybrid world. For those who already know their colleagues well, keeping up with these relationships will be the focus. That task can be done in many of the same ways mentioned here.

In January 2021, I began teaching an advanced writing class synchronously online. In the fall of the same year, I began a remote Visiting Assistant Professor position where I would teach legal writing three ways: asynchronously, synchronously, and in person. The majority of this instruction was asynchronous. This experience taught me how to force myself to network and meet

new people at my institution and in the legal writing community. I would sit in my home office in Florida and record video lectures for my students located all around the nation. I would complete weekly modules by preparing quizzes, discussion posts, PowerPoint presentations, and other instructional materials. Once a week, I would facilitate an optional synchronous “office hour” in my Zoom room where I could teach and speak to students live. Still, I had to serve the law school and write. But with beginning an academic career online, where would I find time and a way to form connections?

The struggle I had was getting to know my fellow faculty members and adequately serving the institution, remotely. Luckily, due to the pandemic, most faculty events were offered in a Hyflex format, online and in-person, if not fully virtual. Frequent emails and Teams chats became a norm for me with students and faculty on the legal writing team.

To stay connected, I realized it boiled down to two things: getting involved and showing up. Let me explain. For a remote Visiting Assistant Professor, it can be difficult to get involved in the community and your institution. For me, I joined three faculty committees. The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion faculty committee, the Wellness committee, and the Faculty Development committee were my first choices at my institution. I also joined networks and committees outside of my institution. Affinity networks such as Lutie Lytle (an organization for black women law professors), new members sections of ALWD and AALS, and the SEALS Writing Connections committee helped me form great relationships. I became an associate editor for JLWI and volunteered to peer review scholarship for JALWD. I attended as many faculty meetings and other meetings as I could virtually and I met with my fellow legal writing colleagues via Teams, text, email, and Zoom. I met with my mentors and mentees as much as possible. Finally, I attended as many conferences online and in-person as I could. Because all legal research and writing programs are not the same, I understand that all these examples may not work for everyone. If you cannot join a committee, for example, think of ways you may be able to volunteer for campus events such as trial team competitions or the like. That is, if there is any downtime to volunteer elsewhere as a legal skills professor!

I consider connection time during faculty and student meetings. Also, if you are required to serve on committees that is a great time to meet new faculty, students, and staff and form connections. And first thing in the morning is a good time to email or Teams chat with your colleagues and return those emails. Don't forget to be a “hype woman” as another way to remain connected to the institution and the community while working remotely. Celebrate your colleagues' successes. Even via email, text, call, or private message, you can show your appreciation just as much as you could in person. And another thing –

don't blow off the virtual social events! Got a virtual coffee, lunch, happy hour, or other social invite? Engage and enjoy.

To show up, sometimes you have to make a plan. Whether you are in the same city as your law school or not, it's good to show up every now and then. In my situation, there is an in-person requirement for remote students to be on campus for instruction twice per semester. I would be there during those times as well as other times that I saw fit. Being in person on campus during the first and last week of classes were a must, but I also found it important to be there during team building events if possible. Spending days on campus allows you to be available for impromptu chats with the dean, students, faculty, and staff. I could have coffee or lunch with mentors and other colleagues before returning to my normal Zoom home office.

Working remotely can actually present an opportunity to strengthen relationships and promote a positive culture of work-life balance. When working from home, work-life balance can be hard to do even when you have a dedicated office or workspace. So, when is there time to build these new relationships or maintain old ones, you ask? To ensure I have a balanced life, I would set certain hours for each of my responsibilities. For example, I would try to prep for class for two hours, write for one to two hours, and use the rest of the day for committee meeting, committee work, or student meetings. Without this makeshift schedule, the flexibility of academia was a blessing and a curse for me. It left me either always working or not working enough. I tried to do the schedule in a 9-5 manner at first but that doesn't always work out – especially when you have children. So, my plan helped me to get all aspects of my job done while still having time for family responsibilities and Netflix!

While many of us are shifting back to more traditional forms of legal writing instruction, some of us remain in remote or hybrid situations. It doesn't have to be challenging to maintain the same connection that usually occurs organically, but it can be intentional. Through these methods, in the past year, I have been able to form strong connections with students and faculty inside and outside of the legal skills department, as well as connect with the national legal writing community.