

6-18-2019

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Recommended Citation

Bowden, Michael M., "Law School News: Making It Affordable 06-18-2019" (2019). *Life of the Law School (1993-)*. 681.
https://docs.rwu.edu/law_archives_life/681

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June 18, 2019

Law School News

Making It Affordable

How the Great Recession helped shape the institution that RWU Law has become at 25



June 18, 2019
Michael M. Bowden

As Roger Williams University School of Law celebrated its 25th anniversary over the past year, the school enjoyed the privilege of having become an integral part of the Rhode Island and regional legal profession and the community at large. Throughout the 2018-19 academic year, *RWU Law e-newsletter* examined different aspects of the school's evolution over that period in the areas of diversity, experiential learning and public interest. In this final installment of the series, the focus is on affordability.

Just over a decade ago, as the Great Recession ravaged the U.S. economy across multiple industries, the bottom fell out of the nation's legal education sector. Applications dropped precipitously; law schools from coast to coast struggled to make their budgets, and some law schools folded. Barely 15 years old at the time, RWU Law made several decisions during the downturn that shaped the institution that celebrates its 25th anniversary this year.

“In a crisis, you have to do some real soul-searching and figure out what’s most important about your institution, and what genuinely distinguishes it,” explains Dean Michael Yelnosky. “When you can’t make investments willy-nilly, when you have to be careful and thoughtful about how you spend that next dollar – what do you spend it on? For us, setting those priorities produced some positive results.”

Broadly, the school prioritized: (1) ensuring affordability; (2) doubling down on experiential education; (3) expanding pro bono practice opportunities; and (4) broadening student diversity.

Many of these decisions built on existing institutional strengths and priorities.

“These decisions worked, in part, because they were not artificial; they were organically rooted in who we already were as an institution,” notes Professor David Logan, who was dean from 2003 to 2013, including when the recession hit. “Without those hard choices, I’m not sure we’d be what we are today – a financially stable school that’s going to last for a lot longer than 25 years.”

Affordable Excellence

In its most dramatic response to the changing landscape of legal education, RWU Law introduced its Affordable Excellence initiative, reducing tuition by 18 percent in 2014. In addition, the school guaranteed that tuition would not increase during a student’s three years of law school, and did not increase tuition for an incoming class until 2018. These moves made RWU Law the best-priced ABA-accredited private law school in the Northeast, with tuition and fees that are not just lower but, in many cases, much lower than peer schools.

“We were trying to address, in a very specific way, what the market for legal education was telling us,” Yelnosky explains, “which was that the *value* of a law degree was not in sync, in many instances, with the *cost* of that law degree; that the return on investment started to decrease when the recession hit. It seems an obvious adjustment to make in retrospect, but in real time it was unsettling because it was uncharted territory.”

The results were swift and tangible: enrollment stabilized and then began to creep up again. The move also won the school recognition in national media. The *Wall Street Journal* called out RWU Law as one of “a handful of U.S. law schools” that had successfully boosted enrollment in a down economy by reducing tuition. The *New York Post* added, “Good for these law schools for working to give their students more bang for the college dollar,” again singling out RWU Law for praise. “The smarter schools will follow.”

“It was a bold statement that we weren’t just like every other law school,” says Yelnosky. “We did something that virtually nobody else had done. And it gave us, I think, the sense that we could be more than just passive observers of our market. Instead of being back on our heels, we started to declare the other ways in which we were not like other law schools.”