June 5, 2020

Re: Plans for the Fall 2020 Semester

Dear Incoming JD Students,

We have been working to craft a first-year experience that will prepare you well for your future as a lawyer, while following what medical and public health professionals tell us we all have to do to keep the Law School open. I write today to share those plans, which were prepared and approved by our faculty this afternoon.

This follows on what I described at this afternoon’s new student Zoom Town Hall. If you were not able to make my talk, I, along with faculty and other deans, will also be available to answer questions at two other Zoom Town Halls scheduled for June 8 and 9. Invites to these Zoom Town Halls will be sent by the admissions office over the weekend.

**Context and University Requirements**

Recently, a university-wide Restart Committee—chaired by Dean Jay Hess of the IU School of Medicine, the nation’s largest medical school—completed its report with recommendations on how Indiana University can operate in fall 2020. The Restart Committee’s recommendations, which have been adopted by IU President Michael A. McRobbie, contemplate a model where the university will open this fall with a combination of online and in-person learning. It details a wide range of health and safety requirements, including social distancing, virus testing, contact tracing, the need to wear face coverings, and other precautions to protect your health as the campus reopens. It imposes a number of requirements on the law school, including keeping building density low when students are not in class, having no in-person classes larger than 49 students, increasing the passing period between class sessions, and ensuring that students are not on campus during the peak of the flu season, when health experts believe the virus risks will be greatest.

You can read the Restart Report here. You should also read a message to incoming students from IU Bloomington’s Provost Lauren Robel. The message underscores the importance of residential education, how Indiana University is approaching the coming academic year, and how the university is ensuring the conditions necessary to reduce the risks of transmission to avoid causing you and others to get sick. It’s an important message, and I encourage you to read it closely. The university’s Restart Report follows the best practices set forth by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in its recommendations for colleges and universities.

**The Law School’s 1L Academic Schedule**

The Law School has crafted a first-year academic calendar that meets the requirements set by the university in the Restart Report and Provost Robel’s message. The first year of law school is difficult enough without the additional complication of a global pandemic, but foremost in our mind is the need to preserve the rigor and quality of our courses so that you’re well
prepared for a legal career. Our planning also acknowledges that many of you have different family and personal circumstances. While many of you will be comfortable coming to campus every day—observing all the health-and-safety protocols—others of you, for health and other reasons, may need to take classes online.

The basics of the plan are straightforward. Instead of taking Torts, Civil Procedure, and Contracts throughout a 13-week semester, you will take one course at a time in concentrated four-week blocks, with a final exam at the end of each block. Your Legal Research and Writing course and your Legal Profession course will meet throughout the semester concurrently with the block courses. The attached diagram shows how the 1L fall semester will be scheduled.

Our faculty decided on this approach for several reasons:

• **Social Distancing and Safety Requirements**: The block approach enables us to create smaller course sections that account for the social-distancing requirements that greatly restrict the capacity of our classrooms. You will be taught in the largest classrooms in the Law School. This was the only way to manage the space limitations and still provide you an in-person experience. The intensive approach also enables faculty to better calibrate workloads and to provide you the support to succeed. This will become important should anyone become sick or face other difficulties this fall.

• **Both Online and In-Person Options**: We recognize that students will make individual decisions that comport with their needs and their learning styles, and the plan will enable you to do that. You will be able to choose between in-person and online learning. Whether you choose to be in person or online, you will experience the intellectual debate and important interaction that occurs with classroom discussions. The online courses will be engaging, rigorous, and of exceptional quality.

• **Flexibility and Change**: The plan recognizes that your personal circumstances could change. If they do, and you find that switching to online from in-person learning (or vice versa) is more beneficial, you’ll be able to do that. The block format also reduces the extent of disruption if there’s a significant surge in COVID–19 cases later in the semester and state officials impose stay-home orders. We hope that won’t be the case. But by condensing your doctrinal courses into three four-week blocks, there’s a greater chance of completing whole courses (and an exam) in person, if circumstances relating to the virus change and the school at some point has to change quickly to online instruction.

The block approach is not new. For more than a decade, students who took Torts or Criminal Law during our former Summer Start program did so in an intensive, four-week program. Those who participated reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to focus on only one subject. Faculty are enthusiastic about this approach for its pedagogical benefits. We also think you’ll benefit from spreading out your exams, rather than having them all at the end of the semester.

This message is focused only on the academic schedule. We are also working to develop meaningful interactions and connections outside the classroom. Our faculty and staff are putting together plans to ensure opportunities for online co-curricular learning, advising and career planning in a way that meets the safety requirements set by the university, and keep everyone healthy.
These are challenging times. We recognize that you’ll be entering law school at a unique period in our history. We want to be up front about how we’re able to welcome you back to campus, and to safely keep our classrooms open for the residential experience that’s important to us. We realize that things may change, depending on what happens with the virus. But for now, we felt it important to get to you our plans for the fall semester.

I’ve already had the pleasure of meeting many of you, and I am so pleased you’re joining our community. Bloomington is an exceptional place, and the students who come here are exceptional too. Pandemic notwithstanding, I’m looking forward to meeting you and welcoming you to the Class of 2023.

Warm regards,

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