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Creating a Law School Class Schedule: A Guide for Associate Deans

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If you have ever attempted to prepare a law school class schedule—juggling curricular needs, classroom sizes, professorial whims—you will know how hard a task is involved. If you bother the person in charge of the schedule too much, he or she might unleash the powers of the scheduler upon you. Next year you may find yourself teaching "Legal Spelling" on Saturday mornings at 8:00 A.M.

- Douglas J. Whaley, *Teaching Law: Advice for the New Professor*, 43 OHIO ST. L.J. 125, 126 (1982)

Why this guide?

One of the most important jobs of the associate dean[1] of a law school is to create and manage the class schedule. It's a complicated endeavor, best described as trying to solve an intricate logic puzzle. It is also incredibly important. Students rely on the associate dean to offer and schedule classes in such a way that ensures they can graduate on time with the courses that will help them meet their career goals. Faculty, too, depend on the schedule to be free of errors and without last minute changes. There is also an interrelationship between the schedule and support for faculty scholarship (more on that later). All of this is to say that it's important to get the schedule right the first time around. Yet, there's no formal training in schedule planning that I'm aware of. Most of us learn the job on the fly and with sage advice handed down from our predecessors.[2]

This is, to my knowledge, only the second public guide on how to create a law school class schedule.[3] I wrote it after seeing perennial questions on the ABA associate deans' listserv seeking advice on issues related to scheduling classes. I served as associate academic dean for three years, worked three years as our dean of students before that, and now oversee the whole process in a supervisory role. I like to think that I've learned valuable lessons about the topic and am pleased to share it with the broader legal education community.

Thank you to my colleagues who reviewed a draft of this paper: our current associate academic dean, Michael Perino; former associate deans Marc DeGirolami and Margaret Valentine Turano; and our registrar, Ann Hurt.

Isn't there a technological solution for this?

Let's get this out of the way right away. The answer is no. Sort of. There are expensive software products that will help you create a draft schedule. Essentially, you tell the software various rules (e.g., "Contracts and Torts must be taken in the same semester by the same students" and "Professor Jones cannot teach before 10 am or after 3 pm and only then on Mondays and

[1] It is my understanding that, at a handful of schools, the registrar or other administrator creates the schedule. This guide will be helpful to them as well.
[2] I served as Associate Academic Dean from 2013-16.
[3] I encourage you to read Shelley Saxer & Gary M. Thompson, *Optimizing a Law School Schedule*, 1 PIERCE L. REV. 181 (2003), another helpful guide, one that focuses on various technological solutions to the schedule puzzle. I take a different view of the value of such technology in the process, but I recommend the Saxer and Thompson piece nevertheless.

Wednesdays.”). The problem, in addition to cost, is that by the time you input all of the rules, it would have been quicker just to create the schedule manually. Indeed, I’ve been told by some of the vendors that their products only make sense at the enterprise/university-level; I appreciated their candor. For a university with thousands of courses in a semester, taking the time to program the rules may make sense. For the typical law school, however, the software products are not cost effective.

That said, there is a relatively new player on the scene called OfCourse Scheduling (http://ofcoursescheduling.com). It was originally designed for law schools, so it may be helpful. Our school will be piloting the software this year to see if it meets our needs. The software gathers our rules, imports our list of courses and which faculty will be teaching them, surveys the faculty on their preferences, and then creates a draft schedule. Helpfully, it allows you to see the implications of making changes to the schedule. For example, if you move a class to a new time, it will alert you if an adequately sized room is not available or if the professor is teaching another class. The website has a fuller description of the program and process it uses. We look forward to trying it out, although I’m entering the process with a healthy degree of skepticism, particularly since the user must still assign courses to professors.

Even if you don’t use a product like OfCourse, there are technological tools that can help you with the process. I find that a large screen monitor or a dual-monitor setup can be very helpful, as is Excel. When I was associate dean, I would send faculty their schedules in writing via e-mail so there was a record (for both of us) of our discussions. Similar e-mails also functioned as our contracts for adjunct faculty. Word can be a helpful home for notes and to-dos. Google Forms can be used to collect information from faculty, such as their preferred teaching times. Lower-tech tools can also be handy, such as legal-size pads or a large bulletin board with index cards put up by thumb tacks.

Starting assumptions

I start with the following assumptions about the class schedule. *First*, the primary consideration in making scheduling decisions is the best interests of the student body. Students, after all, are paying tuition and need a schedule that ensures their on-time graduation and availability of classes for career purposes. *Second*, a corollary to the first, is that faculty considerations are important and should be taken into account but only if all things are equal. Having a beneficial schedule with, for example, large blocks of non-teaching time can facilitate the production of scholarship. In contrast, if a faculty member’s schedule is spread throughout the day and evening and includes multiple new preparations in the same semester, his or her productivity is likely to be nil, which has consequences for the institution and for the professor.

These two assumptions are, at times, in conflict. For example, the best interests of the student body may require a second section of a bar exam-tested subject, but the only available time slot is a Friday morning and the only available professor hasn’t taught it in years, thus requiring a lot of work to get ready. Here, a professor’s preference not to teach on Fridays would give way to the students’ interest in having the course offered. The same goes for new preparations, teaching at night, or having a teaching schedule spread out over more than the usual number of days. One tries to avoid these conflicts, but sometimes they are inevitable. This can be difficult for some faculty to understand, particularly those who have never had the pleasure of being the associate dean!

If your school doesn't operate with these assumptions, then you should modify this guide accordingly. For example, the culture at your school may be that the faculty member has much more control over what and when he or she teaches. The same is true if there are rules from a collective bargaining agreement that implicate course scheduling.

Pre-planning: the faculty conversations and big picture considerations

For me, planning for the following year's schedule begins with informal conversations with the faculty in August and September of the current year. I strongly recommend this for new associate deans. It is important to learn your faculty colleagues' interests and preferences, and these meetings are helpful, low-stress ways to do so. While you will have the final say over the class schedule and the faculty's teaching assignments (subject to the provisos above about, for example, collective bargaining rules), much can be accomplished by opening an early dialogue. You may be pleasantly surprised to learn that a colleague has an interest in picking up a new preparation or would prefer to teach at night. (When I was new to teaching, I specifically volunteered to teach the evening section of Legal Writing for several years in a row. It freed up my days to write.) During these conversations, I would take detailed notes but mainly listen. It is premature at this point to discuss nuts-and-bolts of the schedule or to make commitments.

This is also the point at which you should begin thinking about the overall makeup and balance of the curriculum and schedule. Do you wish to emphasize bar exam courses? Skills courses? Scholarly seminars? What balance between doctrine, skills, and experiential education do you want to strike? These big-picture questions should be answered after getting input from the dean and individual faculty members. As associate dean, you have tremendous power to put your own mark on the schedule and, thus, the student experience. Use that power wisely!

Getting organized and setting a schedule

The next step is to set a schedule for yourself. Here, I would work backwards from the registration period. The registrar typically sets those dates well in advance. I will assume that your students, like ours, register for the Fall semester in late March and the Spring Semester in early November. With those dates in hand, work backwards. Add several weeks for students and advisors to be able to review the draft schedule. Establish a date when you will have the final Fall and Spring schedules to the registrar so he or she can enter them into your computer system (e.g., Banner) and proof. From that point, work backwards again – give yourself a week or two to get feedback on the schedule from student leaders, administrators, and faculty members (more on that below).

Most of your work creating the schedule will occur from December through February, when you'll be holed up in your office trying to get all of the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to fit together. This is when you'll send out tentative, personalized schedules to full-time faculty members and contracts to adjuncts. I like this timeframe because by December you typically know which faculty will be retiring or on-leave in the following year and whether you'll have any new hires.

Note that you should plan the following year's schedule in full: Fall, Spring, and Summer. The various semesters' schedules go hand-in-hand. You'll want to ensure a balance between the main semesters of electives and required courses. If you make a mistake in the Fall, you could box yourself in for the Spring term. Because it can get confusing between the two semesters, I recommend a color-coding system – red for Fall and blue for Spring, for instance.

You'll need certain supplies to get started:

- The current year's schedules, organized three ways (your registrar can sort for you): by professor, by course name, and by day/time. You may also want to have the previous year's on hand as well.
- If possible, ask your IT department to create a database of faculty and their courses taught going back in perpetuity. I find this helpful when looking for someone to pick up a "refreshed" preparation for something they haven't taught in a while and to identify when a person may next be eligible for a research leave.
- The Student Handbook or other document showing the list of required courses and degree programs.
- A list of full-time faculty members with an indication of their teaching load. This will vary from school-to-school. Some base their courseloads on number of courses (e.g., "three courses a year") while others use credits (e.g., "10 credits per year").
- You should know your policy for faculty members who teach overloads (do they "bank" or get paid extra?) and the total amount of your adjunct budget for the year.

Then, take a deep breath. The information will look overwhelming, but the rest of this guide will break down the process for you.

Know your blocks

Talk to your registrar about the "blocks" used for the law school. "Blocks" are segments of time in which courses are offered. These are important to know, because as much as possible you want to keep courses "in block." For example, if the blocks on Mondays are from 9-11 am and 11:10 am-1:10 pm, you would want to try not to offer a course from 10 am-12 noon. This would cause the course to occupy two blocks, preventing you from offering another class in that room.

Here are our blocks, by the way:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9:00-11:00	9:00-11:00	9:00-11:00	9:00-11:00	9:00-11:00
11:10-1:10	11:10-1:10	11:10-1:10	11:10-1:10	11:10-1:10
1:20-3:20*	1:20-3:20	1:20-3:20*	1:20-3:20	(no classes after)
4:00-6:00	4:00-6:00	4:00-6:00	4:00-6:00	
6:15-8:15 pm	6:15-8:15 pm	6:15-8:15 pm	6:15-8:15 pm	
8:25-10:25	8:25-10:25	8:25-10:25	8:25-10:25	

(*We only schedule adjunct-taught courses in these blocks in order to make time for faculty meetings, committee meetings, and colloquia.)

Despite my caveat above, it's acceptable to have inconsistencies *within* blocks. For example, let's say a 3-credit class meets twice a week for 1.5 hours each. You could schedule it on Mondays and Wednesdays 9-10:30 am. You could also do so 9:30-11:00 am. Either one works, since both meeting times are "in block."

Starting fresh vs. using last year's schedule as a template

As much as possible, it is helpful not to start the schedule over from scratch. Instead, use the current year's schedule as a template. This means copying over the current year's schedule and using it as the upcoming schedule by making slight adjustments. You're not re-doing everything but instead fixing errors or problems from the current year, substituting professors, and adding or removing courses. At a minimum, use the current schedule as a starting point.

This sounds easier than it actually is. In some cases, you'll find a cascading set of problems. For example, it may be one professor's turn to teach a 1L course, but putting him or her into the preexisting block will cause the professor to have a course conflict or … worse … a four-day schedule! So, then, you have to try moving one of the professor's courses, which then causes another problem, et cetera.

As best as possible, try the template approach. If you find that you've set off a cascading set of irreparable problems, you may have to start from scratch. Indeed, some schools' schedules have so many changes each year that the associate dean has no choice but to start over each year.

If you are starting from scratch: make a list of courses you would like to offer, the professors who will teach them, and the semesters they will be offered. This will help you when you then begin the scheduling process. It is best not to conflate these two steps. First decide the courses you will offer and then figure out the minutiae like day, time, and room location.

If you are adjusting the current schedule as a template: go through the course list and draw a line through the courses you will not offer next year. (Earlier, I told you to get multiple copies of the schedule. I would make actual changes on only one of them: the course report alphabetical by course name. Also, be sure to use pencil!) There are many reasons to cancel a course:

- Specialty electives that are best on an "every other year" schedule. This is why it's helpful to go back two years to check if there are any electives you should be adding for next year.
- Courses that received low enrollments in the current year.
- Courses that you have determined never to offer again. Be sure to remove these from the course catalogue, per ABA Standard 509, Interpretation 509-1.
- Adjunct-taught courses where you have decided not to renew the adjunct's contract and do not wish to offer the course with someone else.

Likewise, go through and cross out the names of professors who appear in the schedule but will be on leave or retiring. This indicates a hole in the schedule: a course you would like to offer but you need to find someone to teach it.

My remaining suggestions and steps will be done semester-by-semester but with the master list of courses close by.

Adding or checking the foundations of the curriculum

Whether you are starting from scratch or adjusting the current schedule as a template, your attention should next be directed at the foundations of the curriculum to make sure they have the correct professor assignments, do not conflict with each other, have available rooms, and are in blocks that you want. "Foundations" are the courses that you must offer no matter what. They include your 1L required curriculum, any 1L electives, and upper-level required and core courses (such as those covering bar subjects).

The 1L schedule is often the easiest to put together. It forms a nice anchor to the rest of the curriculum, so I would start there before moving on to the other "foundations" courses I listed. For example, if a professor who prefers a 2-day schedule teaches both Contracts and Business Organizations in a semester, once you schedule Contracts, you can pencil in Business Organizations in a different block on those days. If you have multiple sections of the 1L class, it is important to schedule accordingly. I try to keep all of the sections of a class meeting at the same time (e.g., all Contracts sections on Mondays at 11:10 am), but this is not essential.

Upper-level, large enrollment courses are important to schedule in a smart way. Here, look at your course history reports from the registrar to see which courses tend to draw the biggest enrollment. These should be scheduled with care to avoid conflict with each other. For example, at our school, Business Organizations and Evidence are upper-level core courses that draw large enrollments; so too does Introduction to Intellectual Property. For that reason, we make sure these courses are not scheduled in conflict with one another, to the extent possible. Sometimes conflicts are unavoidable.

Schools with a large number of upper-level required courses have an easier time of the schedule, since those classes can be scheduled much like 1L classes by section.

Adding or checking specialty courses that must meet at a particular time

Certain electives or specialty courses must be offered at particular times, like clinics or electives with high-profile adjuncts. These should be scheduled or confirmed next.

Examine the 1L schedule

Next, I like to spend time carefully studying the 1L block schedules by section. These can be generated out of Banner or a comparable computer system by your registrar. They will show what each section's schedule looks like each semester. You should look for the following:

- Have you offered all of the required courses?
- Are rooms adequate to hold the expected incoming class?
- Are classes sufficiently spread out over the course of the week? It is best not to cram too many classes in a day while leaving other days sparse.
- Do students have adequate time for lunch and other breaks?
- Are all professors assigned? Some schools give considerable thought to the professorial makeup of their 1L sections to ensure an even mix of personalities, difficulty, ideology, teaching quality, and gender/racial diversity.

Adding the electives

Next, sprinkle in the electives or, if you're using this year's schedule as a template, confirm that they are where they should be. I typically start with the full-time faculty, since they often teach the foundational courses I mentioned above, and you can use those days/times to schedule their electives. Next, proceed with the adjuncts.

Getting input/consent from faculty

Once you have draft schedules for the Fall and Spring, let it sit for a few days. Then, take a look at it from a fresh perspective. It will be easy to spot conflicts this way, such as having a professor teaching two classes at the same time.

Next, it is time to share a draft of your schedule. I recommend starting with the full-time faculty. Rather than sending the full schedule out in an e-mail, I prefer to send individualized e-mails. This allows me to make notes and establishes an electronic trail of our discussions. Here is a sample e-mail:

> Dear ____,
>
> I have finished putting a draft schedule together for the next academic year. As you can imagine, the schedule is an intricate and complicated jigsaw puzzle, and it's not always possible to give every professor the schedule he or she would prefer. Nevertheless, I have tried hard to craft a class schedule that is not only good for students (the most important concern) but that also takes into account faculty scholarship, principally by matching pedagogical/scholarship interests and providing large blocks of time for writing. I also continue to work to balance the schedule so that the responsibility for teaching our evening students is shared evenly and fairly among the full-time faculty.
>
> Please review what I have proposed below and let me know if you would like to request any changes. Since students will be registering in a few weeks, it is important that we hammer

out all of the details—day, time, room, and, if appropriate, enrollment cap—now, not after students have signed up.

Summer 2016
N/A

Fall 2016
Civil Procedure - M/W 9:00-11:00 am / Room LL-07
Family Law - M/W 4:00-5:25 pm / Room 2-12

Spring 2017
Conflicts of Law – M/W 6:15-7:40 pm / Room 2-16
Securities Regulation - M/W 4:00-5:25 pm / Room 2-25

I would appreciate any feedback by Monday, February 22. Thanks!

Larry

A few notes:

- My communication makes clear that I am looking for feedback, not assent. Your school's culture may be different; you may need the faculty member to sign off. If so, adjust the language accordingly.
- I like to remind faculty about how complicated the schedule is to ward off any requests for unreasonable adjustments.
- You'll notice that I provide room assignments. Not all associate deans assign rooms; some have the registrar do this. I preferred to do it, because there may be pedagogical concerns with assigning a particular class to a particular room. For example, skills classes should be offered in classrooms with movable furniture, if possible.
- One of the advantages of writing individual e-mails is that it allows for another opportunity to catch errors. For example, if I had scheduled the professor above to teach at conflicting times, I would have seen it when writing the e-mail.

These e-mails usually result in very prompt responses from faculty. For those who have no comments on their schedules, I simply file the e-mails away in a folder in my e-mail application. For those that raise issues or make requests, I tend to handle them as a batch, again considering the cascade effect of schedule changes. It is also important to make sure that you don't move around the schedule of someone who didn't have any requests without checking with him or her first.

Here, it is handy to have a running Excel spreadsheet listing the courses, professors, and whether you have received a response/comments. Excel can be helpful in that it allows you to filter and sort by various criteria. For example, you can isolate specific blocks or faculty members to focus on issues there.

Once the full-time faculty e-mails are sent, I then proceed with the adjunct e-mails, which are more formal, since they serve as our contracts. Here is a template:

Dear _____,

I am very happy to formally invite you back to teach at St. John's Law as an adjunct professor in the 2016-17 academic year. I have tentatively scheduled your courses for the day, time, and room noted below. Please let me know if you will be able to teach and whether the draft schedule is agreeable to you. Your compensation for the courses will be ____.

<u>Fall</u>
MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS
Monday/Wednesday
1:20 pm-2:45 pm
Room LL-07

<u>Spring</u>
CORPORATE FINANCE SEMINAR
Tuesday
6:15 pm – 8:15 pm
Room 2-21

A few reminders:

1. Most courses require a minimum of 10 students in order to run. In general, minimum enrollment is measured at two key points: after students register and again in the week or so before classes start. I will let you know if, for some reason, your course doesn't get sufficient enrollment and we have to cancel the course.

2. Some courses have pre-requisites. These may not be waived by the instructor. If a student contacts you asking for a "waiver," please tell him or her that it's not possible and, if there are any other questions, to contact me.

3. Syllabi are due for review no later than four weeks before the start of the semester.

4. If you have an exam in your course, a draft of your exam is due to Secretarial Services no later than two weeks before the exam is administered. In turn, grades are due two weeks after a final exam is administered or, if there is no exam, two weeks from the last day of the semester. These deadlines are important for a host of reasons.

5. Your salary will be paid on a set schedule throughout the semester.

6. The Adjunct Faculty Handbook summarizes all of our academic policies, which you are required to adhere to. If you do not have a current copy, please contact my assistant.

7. Adjunct appointments are for one semester only. The planning process for the next academic year begins in December of the calendar year before. We look at a variety of factors to decide how often a course is scheduled. Likewise, in making adjunct appointments, we place a high value on teaching quality, as measured by student evaluations and in-person visits by members of our full-time faculty.

We are very grateful for the contributions that you and all of our adjunct faculty make to the academic program at St. John's. I hope your schedule will permit you to join us next semester.

Regards,

Monitoring the adjunct e-mails is usually pretty easy, since they are teaching fewer classes.

Getting input from others

So you've drafted the schedule, sent out many individualized e-mails, received comments back, and adjusted your schedule accordingly, so you're ready to distribute it, right? No. It is helpful at this point to get a further round of input from student leaders, official/unofficial heads of academic areas, and administrators. Student leaders can be very helpful in spotting errors and conflicts that you may not have thought of. Their ears will be open to the courses that students are most interested in and can anticipate bottlenecks in your schedule. Likewise, I like to send the full schedule to what I call the unofficial "department heads" – the faculty who are leaders in major subject areas, such as Intellectual Property and International Law, to make sure the courses in their areas are sequenced and aligned correctly. I would do this only for areas where you have a large concentration of classes and faculty.

I would also run the schedule by key administrators. The head of admissions might have helpful input on the 1L schedule, and the dean may want a heads-up on any tough decisions you had to make. Former associate deans can also sometimes be roped back into duty reviewing your handiwork. I have found my predecessors' comments invaluable.

Proofing

It is important that you provide your registrar with the schedule with as much lead time before registration as possible. The registrar's office will have to input your draft schedule into Banner (or whatever computer system you use for registration) and inevitably problems will be discovered. For example, this stage of the process will ensure that class sizes align with the rooms to which they are assigned. If you have a 100-person class in a 20-person room, that's a problem! It is important to proof the schedule regularly as you continue to make adjustments.

Pre-registration release

Next: the big day. The schedule gets released to students. Ideally this should be several weeks before registration so they can have sufficient time to learn about courses and get meaningful academic advice.

Making adjustments

Once the schedule is released to students, avoid making changes unless absolutely necessary. Some will be unavoidable, such as a room conflict that you missed during the proofing stage or the need to adjust the schedule because of a late faculty retirement. Otherwise, consider the schedule “final.” If changes are needed, ask the registrar to re-publish the master schedule and keep a running list of changes, just in case students are consulting old versions of the schedule.

Monitoring registration

During the main registration period, it is good to ask your registrar for real-time data on registration so you can monitor enrollments and move popular classes to larger rooms if necessary. This avoids students getting told they’re closed out of classes.

At some point, you’ll need to decide whether to cancel a class for low enrollment. Each school is different in how many students are needed for a class to “run.” A separate question is when to measure enrollment for these purposes. If you cancel classes too late, students may not be able to get into other courses or may be upset that their finely tuned schedules have been thrown into disarray. If you cancel too early, you run the risk that the course might have made enrollment through registrations later in the process.

For these reasons, I recommend examining enrollments at two points: immediately after the main registration period and again about three or four weeks before the semester begins. At the first check-in, I would only cancel those classes where enrollment was far below the normal minimum required for a class to go forward. Enrollment for such courses is not likely to go up. At the second check-in, when classes are more imminent, apply the minimums and cancel accordingly.

Note that schools vary significantly in their culture and rules about cancelling low-enrollment classes. At some schools, a full-time professor whose class is cancelled must make it up through an additional course in a later semester or additional administrative work. Some schools never cancel courses taught by full-time faculty.

Conclusion

In making the class schedule, the associate dean has tremendous power and responsibility. By deciding which courses are offered, who teaches them, and when they’re offered, he or she can shape students’ in-class experience. It is easy to lose the big picture when you’re mired in the weeds of time conflicts and room assignments. Ultimately, you won’t be able to make everyone happy. Someone can always find a way to complain about something in the schedule. Classes will, by definition, always conflict with some other courses, unless they’re for some reason in their own time block. Not every faculty member can teach in the middle of the day, two days a week. Something has to give. That’s where the good judgment of the associate dean comes into play, balancing all of the competing interests at stake.

Good luck.