

UVA LAW | Risa orientation

RISA GOLUBOFF: I am very excited to talk to you. You'll see there are some common themes, but I think there's also some that's new. So, I dropped my daughter off at college last night. And so-- I know. And so, I'm thinking particularly about you all sitting there. She was thinking about what she was going to say and answer to all the icebreakers. And thinking about meeting all the new people. So I'm particularly, this year, thinking what it looks like from your perspectives, and of course, your family members' perspectives too, maybe a little bit.

But today is really a momentous day. It is, of course, the first day of the rest of your lives, as always. But until now, you have been regular people in the world, which is awesome. And the whole people you are, are amazing. But today, you are beginning your journey to join the learned profession of the law. You are becoming lawyers, and that process is transformational, and it's momentous. And I have to say I feel a little self conscious about our process compared to, say, the doctors starting this week. They do a white coat ceremony.

And I think that's so cool, where they all put their-- and I keep thinking, like, what can we do? Can we give you a gavel? I just don't know what it is. So you all are the most impressive class in our history. So maybe you will come up with some good ideas, and you should share them. But since what we do as lawyers is talk, I'm going to talk at you. OK. So that's what we do. We talk, right? Did you know that the word for a group of lawyers in medieval England was an eloquence of lawyers? An eloquent. Isn't that beautiful?

There are some other words, but we're not going to use those. We're going to stick with an eloquence of lawyers. So this is a really momentous time to begin your adventure. We are still navigating all of the challenges of the past several years, a global pandemic, economic ups and downs, war, a highly polarized political and cultural environment here and abroad, major shifts happening in our laws and doctrine at the Supreme Court.

And I hope you feel that you all are in the right place to think about these challenges, and other challenges, whatever the challenges in the world are that have brought you to law school. Because I know you are. Going to law school is always a good choice, says the law dean. But it is also, in my view, a particularly good choice right now, whatever your interests, whatever your relationships to all of the hard things that are going on in the world right now.

You will learn new ways to rise to and analyze all challenges. And I echo what Juhi said, the skills you learn here will serve you everywhere. It won't be easy. Law school is never easy. As you know, the legendary difficulty of law school. But it will also be, I hope, exhilarating and energizing, and empowering and rewarding. And, in fact, that's not really just a hope, it's a prediction. Because, I have, for 20 years, been a law professor. My scholarship is about lawyers and the power that they wield in the world.

And now I am the dean of an institution that educates lawyers. So I have pretty good data that says it will be exhilarating and rewarding, and energizing and empowering. And one of the things I want you to keep your eye on is the lawyers. Lawyers do so much in the world. So you've probably already-- maybe not, I won't say it that way. Because then you're going to freak out. One day, I was at the Sunday-- one of the Sunday pre events. And I asked somebody how they were doing. And he said, I'm behind.

I was, like, how can you be behind? Classes don't start for four days. So, you should not have necessarily started doing anything in preparation for your classes yet. But as you start to do that, you will see that a lot of what you read, especially the first semester, but a lot of what you read in law school are opinions written by judges. And you will spend a lot of time thinking about judges. And it may lead you to believe that the judges are the ones with all the power. But behind every case, there is usually at least one lawyer, often two lawyers who bring the cases.

Cases exist because real people in the world experience harms that they think the law can fix. And they think lawyers can help them with. And so, in response, lawyers wield enormous power. And not just only the famous lawyers that you've heard of, who may be your idols, and the reasons you came to law school, but all lawyers. And it's the power to make law, to affect real people, institutions, companies, and nations, to make or break, or enforce contracts, to put people in prison and get them out again, to wage war, and end it, to create companies or allow them to merge, or even go bankrupt.

So this is to say, when you think about what the law is, it's not some constant thing in a vacuum out there, that has nothing to do with you. The law is made, not found, and it will eventually, routinely, and momentously, be made by you. So my job, our job, the job of everyone here at UVA Law School, is to make sure that you understand your power, and to equip you to deploy your power with integrity and responsibility. That will happen. That process of learning will happen in pretty much everything you do here, in student organizations, in casual conversation with other students, in office hours, and especially in your classes.

So I want to just describe the three types of classes we teach, so that you have them, seeds in your head, as Juhi said, for later, when you start thinking about these things. So I'm very proud, because I've talked about these three types of classes for a while. But this year, I came up with a three piece. I know this shouldn't be a big deal. But I'm kind of excited, because I'm not-- you'll learn, I talk, but I'm not pithy. I'm not like the soundbite kind. I have a Twitter account. But I work hard to remain within those characters. It's a real struggle for me. OK.

So the three P's, principles, practice, and perspective. First are principles, thinking like a lawyer. This is what you are here to do. You will learn how to break down problems and analyze problems. You will learn how to reason with clarity. This is fundamental to becoming a lawyer. It's fundamental to your legal education. The two other types, second is practice. You will do experiential learning. Learning skills, the actual work of lawyers. And the service you all owe to the profession, which I'll talk about in another minute.

But this is where you will learn the skills of the practice, and also the integrity and the judgment that comes along with working with real clients, in real circumstances. You will learn-- you will use the learning that you do as lawyers on behalf of others. That is how you will use it. And that's what makes it special. You will also, through those practical experiences-- and this is something Juhi mentioned-- you'll get real insight into your interests, and what kind of practice you want. So thinking about a topic or an area of law in the abstract, is very different from seeing what it looks like on the ground.

Are you in and out of court? Are you talking to people all the time. Are you writing all the time? Is it solitary? Is it group based? Is it conflict based? Is it negotiating and collaborative, right? How do you like to work? And many of these opportunities will show you, I don't like that way, as Juhi said, right? But you're not looking for 1,000 things you like. You're looking for one or two, or maybe three. Eric Broyles will tell you more than that. But just through his career, you'll see him in a minute.

But you're looking to eliminate as much as you're looking to include. So open yourself up to all those experiences. And third, perspectives. We offer courses in a wide array of scholarly perspectives that foster the big picture thinking, that is critical not only to practicing the law, but to leading it. So, our faculty are experts in history, jurisprudence, economics, psychology, politics, philosophy, religion, sociology, on top of law. Yes, you are in law school. But all of these perspectives will enable you to ask and answer the big questions about justice, about the rule of law, and about the operation of the law in the real world.

So, for each of you, these three types of classes will mix in different ways. And you will all begin in the first semester on the fundamentals, on the principles. This can seem challenging at first. I will tell you. It seemed challenging to me when I was a first year law student, because a lot of what you will do in your first semester can seem divorced from your passions, can seem divorced from what brought you to law school, and what you want to do in the law. It can seem divorced from the hard moral or ethical questions that you really want to get to, that are underneath the principles.

But we start with these because the faculty think it is necessary and important to the analytical process, to first learn to think like a lawyer, before you then put those principles into practice and perspective. That might feel unnatural to you. And I encourage you, if it does, to explore ways to think about that process. So here are a few possibilities. One, ask your professors why they teach the classes the way they do. Why do they make the choices that they have? Why they aren't asking the questions that you think are the important questions that should be asked?

Second, take opportunities to discuss these questions with your classmates and your colleagues, especially those who seem to take a different perspective from you. And especially our LLM, SJG and exchange students, who have come here from all around the world, as well as our own military, most of whom have extensive practice experience. And all of whom can help you put your own legal education into a much broader perspective. I can't emphasize enough, we are one law school. We are all part of this community. And they have so much to teach you. So I hope you will learn from them.

Next, identify the issues you want to-- you want to explore in future classes, when topics come up, when questions come up, keep a journal. Write them down. And then figure out, what is it that I can take this spring in my electives? What is it that I want to take next year, where I'm going to learn the things that I came here to learn? You will have lots of time to do so. And finally, and this is to echo something Juhi said, although in a slightly different way. From the very beginning of your law school experience, find ways outside the classroom to remind you of your passions, to remind you why you're here.

I agree with Juhi, you can't do all the things. That's too hard. Yeah. I can imagine that would stress you out. But you should do some of them, right? Do pro bono, join a student org, do volunteer work in the community. Figure out ways to continue to make your passion sing, even while what you're learning may be really hard, because it's going to be really hard. And may not-- for some of you it may, but for some of you it may not speak to those passions. So you want to be reminding yourself all the time what they are.

So in other words, becoming the lawyers that you came here to be is partly about the classes you'll take and what you'll learn in the classroom, and it's also about your approach to those classrooms-- your approach to those classes and what you take away from them. So, you will learn not only analytical thinking, how to manipulate set legal categories, but also to take ownership over what the law is, and what it should be. And this requires that you see your education as a partnership. We are intending to give you mastery. You are not passive recipients of information. I will tell you, in my classes, I don't allow computers. Many of our faculty do.

But I really encourage you not to take a transcript of what your faculty member says. You are not writing down pearls of wisdom. Don't tell the faculty I said that. They have many pearls of wisdom. And there are some you should write down. But you should also be engaging, arguing in your head, answering questions, thinking of yourselves as actively engaged in the conversation of your education, not simply receiving information that you're going to regurgitate at some later time. You are active participants. You've got to own your own adventure. OK?

So, everybody raise your hands. Everybody hands up, hands up, OK. Now say, UVA law is the best.

UVA Law is the best.

OK. So Natalie said she was cold called in front of 120 people. You have now all raised your hands and spoken in a class of more than 300. OK? So, you are ready to do that in any class. The cold call will be scary, but you will make it through. And you should volunteer-- when you have faculty offering for having you volunteer, you should volunteer. Participating in class is a gift. It's a gift to yourselves, it's a gift to each other. It's a gift to your whole educational experience. And participating will lead to ownership over your curriculum, and your learning will lead to mastery, and will enable you to become the people who make the law.

Such mastery, such lawyer, being a lawyer, which is what you're here to do, brings with it two important things. And I want to break these out. So, the first thing that you will get when you achieve mastery is opportunity. You can do literally anything. You can dream big, and you should dream big. And make it happen. Careers are long. They are not linear. And no two are the same. And this is your chance to prepare for the whole long thing. This is your schooling to think, not just, what am I going to do when I graduate? But what do I see myself doing 20, 30 years out?

And you may not even be able to tell. But it will be amazing, and it will be wondrous. And I know that because I have watched those who have come before you go off into the world. And I see them clerk for judges, and practice in nonprofits, or in government, or in firms. They become CEOs of hedge funds, and heads of legal aides, and US attorneys, and judges, and Congress people, and senators, and presidents. You can even become the New York Times puzzle master. Or start a biotech company focused on curing cancer, like Eric Broyles, who will speak in just a few minutes.

Some of you already what you want to do, or maybe you think you know what you want to do. I thought I knew what I wanted to do when I came to law school. I had no idea what a law professor was. I had no idea what a law school dean was, but here I am. So it may not be that you end up doing what you think are doing. And that's fine. Some of you are sitting here thinking, people know what they want to do. I don't what I want to do. That's fine, too. Whatever direction it goes in, you can't possibly know, because you haven't done it yet.

So, all of these are fine ways to do it. But what you do need to know, is that you will have power, and you will have opportunities. And you will find wonderful ways of taking them. And you also want to find ways, thinking about how you want to take those opportunities. Because the cognate to opportunity that comes with mastery is responsibility. So, law is not just a job. And I started off with this little phrase, you are joining a learned profession. A learned profession has two parts to it. The learned part, it is marked by, quote, extensive learning or erudition. That's what you're doing. You're going to be erudite and learned when you graduate. And I will remind you of that when you are graduating.

And second, a learned profession is professed to ideals. That's where the profession part comes from. You are professed to ideals. And in our case, we are professed to the ideals of justice and the rule of law. There are no set definitions to those terms. And they have become much more challenging in recent years. But a big part of what you will do here is think about what you mean by justice and the rule of law. How do you define it? How do others around you define it? How do you engage into conversations about it?

But however contested those terms might be, they are the lode stars of our learned profession. And being a learned profession means you are entrusted with the knowledge and the license to practice law. And that means that you have an obligation to do public good, as well as work for private gain and personal glory. Holding that public trust begins now, in law school, with pro bono work, with externships, with summer jobs, with clinics.

I could not encourage you in more emphatic terms to take one of our 24 amazing clinics, where you will get real world experience and skills. You will meet real people and clients, and you will learn empathy and understanding. You already have empathy. But you will learn more empathy and understanding. So start thinking of yourselves right now, as you put on your white coat, your gavel, whatever the thing is that we're going to do, as public servants, as well as lawyers. There are so many ways to fulfill that obligation in your regular jobs, outside of your regular jobs, in pro bono work, in community service.

But all of your paths flow through this understanding of yourselves as holders of this trust, as active participants in the law, and thus in the governance and leadership of American society and the larger global community. There's no better place to become that lawyer than here. You already know that. That's why you're sitting here. And there's no better place for all the usual reasons about our amazing faculty, and classes, and students, all of you.

But more than that, is that we are all engaged. And you've already heard some about this, and I think you'll hear more from Eric. We are all engaged in a shared enterprise beyond the learning and professionalization experience. We come, all of you, all of us, from different backgrounds, experiences, views, attitudes, politics, interests, hopes and dreams. And we come from all over the world. And across all those differences, we share the values of joy, humanity, respect, dialogue, collaboration, and community across different-- you can see I'm not pithy, I like lots of words, right? Not just the three P's.

This combination of diversity, but all those things, they mean different things. I want them all in there. OK. This combination of diversity and pluralism, with commitment to community, is really rare in an institution. And it is, I think, one of our greatest strengths as an institution. And one of the key ingredients in the enormous successes of our graduates out in the world. Combining diversity and pluralism with community means that we are not siloed, but engaged. As a community of belonging, we can reach across our differences to engage in ongoing, respectful, empathetic, and robust exchange of ideas. And doing so isn't only about our values as an institution, and our educational mission. It's also fundamental to being a lawyer.

The legal profession is committed to resolving conflicts through dialogue and persuasion, and that too begins now, in law school, where your ideas and your opinions will be challenged, stretched and tested. Where you will hear, inside and out of the classroom, thoughts, positions, and views that run counter to your own, that you might even abhor. The lawyer's commitment to analyzing and solving problems requires us to hear the best arguments against our own, even when it's hard, which sometimes it will be, and even when the opposing position is one with which you deeply disagree. And you should, if you do, deeply disagree.

But that is what will enable you to test your own beliefs, and critically, to make the best arguments on behalf of the clients that you will represent. This isn't easy. And we don't take any of it for granted. We are always looking, as an institution and a community, for ways to foster the kind of community of belonging in which the free exchange of ideas can truly occur. And it's up to each of us, and each one of you, to sustain that community. So treat one another with empathy, respect, and a generosity of spirit. The kind of generosity that Dean Blazer was talking about.

And it is up to each of us, and each of you, to test ideas both alone and together. So, talk in class, and listen. Go to office hours with your professors. And a favorite of our president and UVA Law grad, and former faculty member, Jim Ryan, ask questions of those with whom you disagree. And consider their answers. I know that we, that you, are up to the challenge. Even in a year, when we will no doubt disagree about politics, and elections, and cases, and major issues facing this country and the world, meeting that challenge is a large part of what will make your time here transformative.

It is also what will make you UVA lawyers, not just any lawyers, but UVA lawyers. Lawyers who not only the law, but shape it, who think not only about what the law does, but what should the law do. And who not only practice the law, but lead it. It is what will make you all the best hope for our future, our nation, and our world. So that all begins now, today. You guys are ready. And I cannot wait to see what you do. So, thank you.

[APPLAUSE]