
AALS Section—Associate Deans for Academics and Research

Spring 2025 Newsletter

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Jason Jarvis, Pepperdine Caruso Law: Chair's Message

This year's AALS theme is **"Impact, Excellence, Endurance in Legal Education"** and, as I consider this theme, the one word that comes to mind is *resilience*.

Resilience is more than just enduring hardship. It's about recovering, adapting, and emerging stronger after difficult

events without allowing the pain of those events to hold us back.

As I write my first Chair's Message of the year, I can't help but reflect on the challenges that have recently tested the Los Angeles community of which Pepperdine Caruso Law is a part. These past few months have been an unexpected lesson in resilience—not just for our students, but for ourselves.

On December 9, 2024, the "Franklin Fire" ignited in Malibu, rapidly consuming 2,500 acres and reaching the edges of Pepperdine University's main campus—right in the middle of Caruso Law's final exam period. The disruption forced the unprecedented postponement of exams until the week of January 6, one week before Spring classes begin. As students prepared to sit for their rescheduled exams, two more wildfires—the "Palisades" and "Eaton" fires—erupted on January 7, 2025, also the same day the AALS annual meeting began in San Francisco.

The fires didn't just destroy thousands of acres and homes; they took twenty-nine lives across Los Angeles County. The impact on our campus was immediate and severe. Power outages, natural gas disruption, and the closure of Pacific Coast Highway (our main

road for campus access) forced us to reschedule exams yet again.

For our law school community, these events were unwelcome challenges. Some 1Ls, for example, prepared three different times for Civil Procedure exams they wouldn't take until seven weeks after their final class. Even students whose exams weren't directly affected faced sudden shifts to online classes, commutes that tripled in length, and the uncertainty of what the future held. We know other law schools have confronted similar natural disasters in the past, and as unprecedented as these fires felt, we must prepare for them (or other disasters like them) to happen again. Natural disasters confront us with forces beyond our control. And they remind us—sometimes brutally—that resilience is not just theoretical.

Natural disasters are among the most direct and physical types of corporate adversity, but they aren't the only type. Our students face their own personal challenges too that, although perhaps not as likely to make headlines, may be equally frightening and difficult: financial insecurities, family crises, discrimination, illnesses, and other lived experiences that test their endurance. As Associate Deans, we stand with our students in

these struggles. We see their resilience, we honor their perseverance, and we learn from them. Their ability to confront adversity and continue forward teaches us about strength, adaptability, and the human capacity for growth.

Resilience needs to extend beyond individual experiences. It is woven into the fabric of legal education itself. Higher education itself is at an historic juncture of profound upheaval. Aside from the “usual” pressures against academic and judicial independence, the federal government has recently moved to challenge DEI programs, suspended scientific and medical research grants, threatened campus free speech, and purported to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education. The legal and political landscape is shifting beneath our feet where we stand, and in ways that demand renewed engagement and continued resilience from all of us.

But how do we gain resilience? In the past, I have often thought of resilience as an inherent trait. But I’ve learned over the years, and especially recently, that resilience is cultivated. We should celebrate and encourage the process of cultivating resilience with our students because legal practice demands it. Practicing law is strenuous and constantly evolving. Attorneys carry heavy responsibilities, engage in emotionally draining work, and notoriously struggle with substance abuse, depression, and anxiety. Given as much, our responsibility is not to shield students from adversity but to equip them with the skills to navigate it. If we do,

then we are preparing our students to be both successful and healthy counselors and attorneys, which is the first and foremost job of any law school.

Although the challenges we and our students face—whether natural disasters that affect us collectively or personal crises that affect us individually—can be anxiety-inducing and heartbreaking, they can also help build resilience if we open ourselves to that possibility and model it as leaders for others. That resilience is essential to Associate Deans as we navigate both internal and external challenges to our institutions. As we step deeper into 2025, let’s commit to fostering resilience—not just as individuals, but as leaders at our institutions. The future of legal education, and in turn the rule of law, depends on it.

Announcements

AALS New Teachers Conference June 5-7

If you will be at the AALS New Teachers Conference in Washington DC and would like to help host a networking session, please let the Chair or any member of the Executive Committee know.

Introducing Your 2025 Executive Board:

Chair: **Jason Jarvis**, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Pepperdine Caruso Law

Chair-Elect: **Michael Gentithes**, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, University of Akron School of Law

Executive Committee Members:

Olympia Duhart, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs & Strategic Initiatives, Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law

Steven D. Schwinn, Associate Dean for Research and Faculty Development, University of Illinois Chicago Law School

Angela Upchurch, Acting Dean, Southern Illinois University Simmons Law School

Save the Date: Associate Deans’ Zoom Meeting!

Please plan to join us on April 8, 2025, at 2pm Eastern time for our first Zoom meeting of the year, where we will talk about the challenges of 2025 and how we and our schools are responding to them. We will circulate an RSVP and Zoom link soon.

Member News

*Awards, Appointments, Moves,
Promotions, Publications, and
Other Notable Achievements*

This newsletter was compiled by
the Executive Committee, AALS
Section of Associate Deans for
Academics and Research

Hannah Brenner Johnson,
current Vice Dean and Professor of
Law at California Western School
of Law has been selected as the
next Dean of **Southern Illinois
University Simmons Law
School**, effective July 1, 2025.

Josh Douglas, became the Acting
Associate Dean for Research at
the **University of Kentucky
Rosenberg College of Law**. He's
the author of numerous articles
and books on election law and
voting rights, including his 2024
book, *The Court v. The Voters: The
Troubling Story of How the
Supreme Court Has Undermined
Voting Rights*.

Morris Ratner, Provost &
Academic Dean, **UC Law San
Francisco**, has [posted results](#) of
AccessLex-funded grant study on
the determinants of bar success:

Jerry Dickinson [Appointed Dean
of Pitt Law](#) and **John Linarelli**
[Appointed Vice Dean of Pitt Law](#).

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exchange of information and points
of view. Any opinions expressed
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AALS.