At present I am engaged in a gargantuan, some would say impossible, task: to synthesize in one, hopefully readable, volume of 12 chapters the law of international organizations.

Thanks to a semester-long sabbatical, the first in seven years of full time teaching, I am nearly halfway there. Five chapters now cover “international institutional law” and deal with such issues as whether international organizations (such as the organizations of the U.N. system or the European Union) can sue and be sued, enter into contracts and treaties, expansively “reinterpret” their constitutions, have legal personality respected both internationally and under domestic law, and enjoy privileges and immunities. Next up: chapters assessing international organizations’ techniques for “law-making,” including tools for standard-setting, facilitation with compliance, and enforcement. Finally, I hope to address the “bigger picture”: the difference these organizations make from a broader (including jurisprudential) perspective.

Why do it? Because my students have convinced me that such a book is needed. And because, even though any eventual book will not be a bestseller, these issues are likely to be of considerable import over the coming decades. Global institutions have accompanied the increasing internationalization of commerce, security and human rights, yet few of us, least of all policymakers, have come to terms with the rules by which these institutions govern themselves and even less with the rules that might govern these institutions. As this suggests, my book is aimed at three audiences: students of international law, practitioners, and fellow academics.

I hope to render organizational achievements and flaws a bit more transparent, while addressing fundamental questions their operations raise. Do institutions like the World Trade Organization or the International Labor Organization make a difference to the degree of states’ compliance with rules governing trade or labor rights respectively? International lawyers like to think so but would a political realist agree? If organizational processes make a difference to how nations (and individuals) behave, how do they do so? Are the rules these organizations help to promulgate or enforce similar to those that Grotius (arguably the first international lawyer) wrote about in the early 17th century? Are they the kind of rules the drafters of the U.S. Constitution had in mind when they wrote its supremacy clause or the treaty clause in article II, section 2(2)? Can we afford to leave such organizations essentially in the hands of the executive branches of governments or should this “new world order” of dynamic processes for international lawmaking be subject to other checks and balances? (See, in this connection, Law Quadrangle Notes, Vol. 39, No. 1, at 40, and Vol. 37, No. 3, at 40.)

Although I am trying to convey what I have for years taught, writing the book has been far more rewarding (and daunting) than I had anticipated. I am learning, with humility, how little I really know about a subject I have taught for 13 years (including five years as an adjunct professor at Georgetown). There are greater risks associated with this project than with respect to my usual law review articles on more manageable topics, such as the role of judges in the International Court of Justice and in the war crimes tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. (See 90 American
My task is especially challenging because it demands crossing "public" and "private" divides within my field and compels forays into others, including "non-legal" specialties. It also requires the patience to deal with restive organizations that refuse to stand still long enough for their picture to be taken.

I have no idea as yet whether the entire project will jell. Nor do I know how successful other on-going projects will be — such as planning next year's annual meeting of the American Society of International Law or a new course this fall, with my colleague John Jackson, dealing with "compliance with international law."

Scholarship and teaching involve such risk-taking. It is what makes them so intoxicatingly attractive.


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Kathleen A. Wilson, Third-Year Law Student

José Alvarez is a dynamic teacher who brings an enormous amount of energy to the classroom and to the international law program more generally. He works hard to foster students’ enthusiasm for international law, and devotes an unusually generous amount of time to student projects such as the Michigan Journal of International Law and the Jessup International Moot Court competition. As a teacher, he continually pushes students to consider traditional principles of international law in light of contemporary developments in scholarship and state practice, e.g., the impact of feminism on international law. As a mentor, he encourages students to think creatively about a wide range of career options through which they can pursue their interest in international law.”