

Spring 2019

Law Students' Perspectives on Interdisciplinary Education: A Qualitative Study

Kellie Lockemer
kml134@zips.uakron.edu

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Follow this and additional works at: https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects

Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lockemer, Kellie, "Law Students' Perspectives on Interdisciplinary Education: A Qualitative Study" (2019).
Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects. 913.
https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/913

This Honors Research Project is brought to you for free and open access by The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors College at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

Law Students' Perspectives on Interdisciplinary Education: A Qualitative Study

Kellie Lockemer

The University of Akron

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore law school students' perspectives on interdisciplinary social work education. For this qualitative study, a purposive sample of current law students (n = 11) were invited to participate in a survey to give their perspectives on their current education and thoughts on interdisciplinary education. The results showed that, although the clinic work was helpful, most law students did not think traditional law classes helped prepare them for client interactions. The students also expressed an openness and desire for more trainings on client interactions. This study's findings suggest a need for interdisciplinary trainings to prepare law students for future practice.

Introduction

Both social workers and attorneys work in professions driven by human interactions. Both must interview, assess, and intervene or advocate on their clients' behalf. Frequently, the professions overlap and can simultaneously offer help to the same individual facing both legal and social issues (Deck, 2016). It is often the case that neither social work nor law students are trained to aid the other in this overlap. Although law students are educated on the law, they often lack the training to handle clients in a crisis. Social work students are trained to counsel clients, but often do not have the knowledge of the legal system and its inner workings. This creates a gap between the two professions and shows a need for interdisciplinary education that will bring the two disciplines together.

The standard education model for law schools in the United States is for the students to read case law, extract principles, and submit to questioning from the professors. This is meant to model the dynamic that a law student will face in the future when in front of a judge. This prepares law students well for interacting with the judge, yet there is a disconnect in preparation for interacting with clients. Law students are required to take six credits of an externship or work in a clinic to prepare them for their future as attorneys, but they are expected to perform professional duties when they are not yet ready, which makes it easy for them to fail. Social work education, on the other hand, focuses on roleplays and building skills, such as active listening and interviewing, before interacting with clients. The purpose of interdisciplinary education is to enhance the education that both disciplines provide by filling in the gaps that exist in the current education of law and social work. Interdisciplinary education can assist social work students in navigating the court systems and better prepare law students to interact with

their clients. While both law and social work students would benefit from interdisciplinary education, it is not widely implemented.

Literature Review

Interdisciplinary Education

Interdisciplinary education involves not only teaching students the relevant skills from two or more disciplines, but also ensuring that students understand how to integrate both skill sets in everyday work in order to more holistically serve the needs of clients (Taylor, 2006). Interdisciplinary trainings in social work and law would aim to teach social work students about the legal processes and law students about interview and crisis intervention skills as well as community resources. Students trained in interdisciplinary education can achieve "goals that cannot be reached when individual professionals act on their own" (Bronstien, 2003, p. 299). The goals for interdisciplinary education are to enhance the knowledge social work students have of lawyers and vice versa, and to learn ways to better work together to benefit clients. Brandon and Knapp (1999) point out that regardless of the precise form of the interdisciplinary venture, the underlying premise is that an interdisciplinary perspective will better prepare students for practice in their intended fields.

Benefits to Social Work Students

Social work education allows graduates to work in a wide variety of fields, but no matter which field they may work in, they are bound to have clients in need of legal help. It is common for social workers to work with attorneys in the fields of domestic violence, child protection services, immigration, domestic relations court, eviction cases, and many other areas. In instances where it is beneficial, attorneys can call social workers to testify in court regarding

mutual clients. With so many avenues for interactions with attorneys and the court system, social work students do not have adequate education in law.

Interdisciplinary courses on social work and law can benefit social work students in many ways. Hagan and Boys (2015) state that teaching social work students about law allows social workers to have a basic understanding of how the court works and prepares them for the possibility of acting as a witness and everything that process entails. Social work students can also learn more about the legal systems to help clients in a macro way with policy advocacy. “By working with student attorneys in and out of court in a more legal setting, social workers are able to learn a great deal about the law that they will be dealing with professionally, learn how to be an effective advocate, observe various court systems and recognize the different duties expected of them versus that of a legal professional” (Hagan & Boys, 2015, p. 52).

Benefits to Law Students

Collaboration between attorneys and social workers most often occurs during the representation of indigent clients, such as in legal aid services and public defender's offices (Deck, 2016). Boys (2015) argued that “while not all law school graduates will go on to work with low-income clients, all attorneys serve clients” (p. 91). Not all lawyers will be representing indigent clients, who will most likely need social work help as well, but all lawyers can learn how to better engage, assess, and intervene with their clients.

Although trained on the law and court proceedings, law students are sometimes left with gaps in their education and do not know how to interact with their clients. Therefore, these students could stand to gain a wealth of knowledge from interdisciplinary education with social work. The benefits of interdisciplinary education for law students include: (1) interviewing skills

and crisis intervention, (2) advocating for the clients, and (3) knowledge of community resources.

First, rarely do law students take classes on how to interact with client or intervene in a crisis. On the contrary, social work education is built around role playing various case scenarios in order to prepare social work students to interact with their clients, including those in a crisis. Hagan and Boys (2015) asserted that interdisciplinary education can help with interviewing clients by training law students on techniques for managing client emotions. Law students would benefit from learning to interview clients in the cases scenario model often taught in social work.

Second, social work students are trained in ways to advocate for their clients on micro and macro levels. On the micro level, social work students are trained to directly interact with clients to address individual problems. On the macro level, social work students learn to work with large systems in society, providing interventions and advocacy to promote solutions to address critical social issues with diverse populations. Galowitz (1999) specifically emphasized the value of the social worker's ability as an advocate and stated that social workers are able to help lawyers in understanding and relating to the client and better advocate on the client's behalf.

Lastly, knowledge about different areas of social work in the community can help lawyers better serve their clients. Social work students by nature of the profession have a wealth of knowledge about community resources. They learn about the resources in their community in order to relay that information to their clients. Hagan and Boys (2015) stated that benefits of interdisciplinary education from a law student's perspective might be the knowledge of additional non-legal resources that can be made available to future clients.

Although educated differently, both social work and law professions are able to help their clients in many ways. The students learn how to help clients differently and work effectively as a team with other disciplines to become better advocates for their clients (Hagan & Boys, 2015). When the two professions join to share ideas and trainings and work together to help clients, both professions excel.

Gaps in the Literature

Previous research shows that there is a gap in the education of law students, but what is missing in the literature are practical options to implement to improve the legal education. Although research evidences the benefits of dual social work and law degrees (Hagan & Boys, 2015), pursuing a dual degree is not an option for every law student due to the price of education and the added time required to finish an additional degree. More research is needed to examine the law students' perspectives on their education and what can be done to improve the current education in law schools.

Current Study

The University of Akron, like many universities across the country, does not have an interdisciplinary program that connects law with social work. According to the Council on Social Work Education (n.d.) there are only 38 accredited Universities across the country that offer dual social work masters and law degrees. Although these fields are closely related as helping professions, there is still a gap leading to a greater need for the integration of social work skills into legal education. Therefore, this project will focus on two main goals: examining the perspectives of law students on interdisciplinary education and presenting the need for a well-rounded curriculum based in law and social work for the benefit of future clients. By bridging

the apparent gap between the helping services provided by social workers and lawyers, professionals will be able to provide a truly holistic approach to the client's problems.

The benefits of the study would be a deeper understanding of law students' perceptions on their education and possible interdisciplinary classes. Another benefit could include the beginning of a new way to educate future lawyers that better equips them to interview and interact with their clients. In addition, there could be more collaborative education between social work and law to benefit the future law clients by giving law students a base knowledge on social work skills and services. The improvement of legal education by incorporating social work skills is the main motivating factor of this study. This study will aim to answer the question: What are the law school students' perspectives on interdisciplinary education?

Methods

Sampling Strategy

For this cross-sectional study, a purposive sampling method was utilized. Participants were law students at the University of Akron enrolled in the Reentry Clinic or Civil Practice Clinic in fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. To be in the Reentry or Civil Practice Clinic and eligible for the study, they must have been enrolled in the University of Akron's Law School at the time of data collection. A total of 21 participants (10 from the Reentry Clinic and 11 from the Civic Practice Clinic) received the survey. A 52% response rate was achieved with a sample size of 11 participants. Participants included seven second-year law students (64%) and four third-year law students (36%). The protocol was approved by the institutional review board of the University of Akron.

Procedure & Analysis

Participants completed a 12-item questionnaire, which was created for this study and pilot-tested in 4 law students, digitally through Qualtrics. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire included questions about law students' legal education and thoughts on interdisciplinary education. Participants were assured of confidentiality and provided consent. No identifying information was collected from the students in order to protect confidentiality. The self-administered questionnaire took 10-15 minutes. Data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed by noting emergent patterns and themes.

Results

Table 1 shows the questions given to the participants and the major themes present in the questionnaire. The results are presented by the themes below.

Table 1. Questionnaire Themes and Questions

Theme	Questions
Prior Knowledge & Experience	What prior knowledge of the field of social work do you have? Where did you learn this information? Prior to the clinic, did you have any interactions with clients?
Experiences in the Clinic	While working with the social work student in the clinic, what differences did you see in interviewing clients? While working with the social work student in the clinic, how were you both able to better help the client?
Preparation to Better Interact with Clients	Please explain, how well do you think law school courses have prepared you to interact with your clients?

	<p>Please explain, how well do you think the clinic classroom component and the caseloads you managed have prepared you to interact with clients?</p> <p>What additional skills or training do you think you need to better interact with your clients?</p>
Future Outcomes	<p>In your opinion, what are some potential outcomes of teaching law students social work skills?</p> <p>How would knowing social work skills change your practice as a professional?</p> <p>How would an interdisciplinary class on social work skills prepare you to better meet your future clients' needs?</p>

Overall, findings indicate that traditional legal classes are not giving law students the skills they want to be able to effectively interact with their clients. While clinic classes come closer to providing education on these skills, most participants stated that they still want additional trainings. With mostly no prior knowledge of social work or prior interactions with clients, most law students believed that an interdisciplinary social work and legal course could be beneficial.

Prior Knowledge and Experience

Six participants (54.5%) reported that they had no prior knowledge of the field of social work. Four participants (36.4%) referenced different fields of study such as criminology, sociology, psychology, and conflict management, and stated that they learned about these fields while in undergraduate or graduate classes. Only one participant reported having had prior

knowledge of the social work field through family and work: “I have an aunt who's a social worker and I understood a little about what she did and I worked with a family law attorney who often dealt with case workers.”

As for the prior experiences, there was a mix of responses. Eight participants (72.7%) reported having had client interactions prior to working in the clinic whereas the other three participants did not have any prior experiences. When asked where the interactions occurred, their responses included work (45.5%), internships (18.2%), and volunteering (9.1%).

Experiences in the Clinic

The majority of the participants recognized a variety of differences in interviewing clients between social work and law students. Participants stated that the social work intern had more compassion and was better at identifying practical problems and meeting the needs of the clients. One participant described the social work intern's interviewing style as “subtler approach to interviewing. Less direct but more effective.”

More than half of the participants stated that the team effort of the law student and social work student working together was beneficial for the client. Three participants (27.2%) reported that it was helpful specifically for communication with the client because the partnership allowed the team to communicate better, probe deeper, and identify problems more easily. Two participants stated that this teamwork approach was beneficial to the client by providing holistic services. One student put it nicely as follows: “While we could provide legal services, for many people there are other needs that they need to attend to. Having the social work student there helped us be able to provide greater service to our clients.”

Preparation to Better Interact with Clients

The majority of the participants (90.9%) reported that law school classes did not prepare them well for interactions with clients. One student commented that law school courses have prepared them to interact with clients poorly because of “too much abstract theory and not enough real-world application.”

When asked about the clinic classroom component and the caseloads, more participants gave positive responses. The majority of the students (90.9%) stated that clinic classes have prepared them to better interact with their clients. For example, one participant stated, “Excellent. The rubber meets the road.” The participants’ responses ranged from “somewhat” to “The clinic helped far more than anything else.” The following extract illustrates how helpful the participants found the clinic classes: “[The classes have prepared me to interact with clients] very well because I talk to my clients over the phone, meet them in person and help multiple clients during the monthly clinics. From this, I am a lot more comfortable when talking to my clients and this gives me the needed confidence when I am in the field at clinics, and later within my career.”

In addition, participants expressed that they would benefit from more trainings involving clients, whether it be hands-on experience or one of the suggested workshop topics. Four participants (36.4%) stated that repetition or more experiences with clients is all they need at this point. Other suggestions included trainings on how to manage client expectations, how to defuse altercations, how to explain complicated legal terms in layman’s terms, how to best resolve non-legal issues with clients, how to deal with clients in denial, and how to interview clients. One student illustrated this point by saying, “Through the work in the clinic and my volunteering, it is clear that working with people is not easy. Teaching law students how to deal with difficult clients or upset clients would be helpful.”

Future Outcomes

When asked about potential outcomes of teaching social work skills to law students, nine participants (81.8%) had the word, “client,” in their responses, and agreed that it would help to understand the client better or to improve interactions and expectation of the client. For example, one participant stated, “[It would be] a good outcome because social work is a part of being a good advocate for your client, meaning that assisting clients with finding programs for their needs is conducive to reducing recidivism. This is one of the main objectives for social workers.” Another participant further stated: “It would help with the relational portion that isn’t applied through black and white letter of the law.” Whether or not the law students recognized the benefits to clients, participants all agreed that there would be positive outcomes from teaching law students social work skills.

When asked how knowing social work skills would change their practice as a professional, the most common response (n = 5; 45.5%) was that social work skills would make them a more well-rounded, more relatable, or better advocate for their client’s legal and non-legal needs. One law student responded, “It would make you a better legal advocate, one that is more emphatic and compassionate to the client’s issues on a legal and non-legal basis.”

The majority of the participants (72.7%) believed that there are benefits to an interdisciplinary class on social work skills. Responses listed benefits such as a better understanding of their client, being more sensitive about the client’s needs, and learning about resources that they can tell their clients about. One participant stated, “An interdisciplinary class will put me in a better position to be able to focus on the clients' needs outside of the law and the courtroom. Food, shelter, clothing and income are needed, in which are some of the main areas

of focus for social workers given that they know of many different programs that provide assistance.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of law students on interdisciplinary education and to present the need for a well-rounded curriculum based in law and social work for the benefit of future clients. The results showed that law students desire more trainings and are open to the idea of interdisciplinary education classes. These findings are consistent with Boys, Quiring, and Hagan (2015), who found that law students wanted more training, in addition to their traditional classes, on how to better interact with clients.

Law students in this study reported low levels of prior knowledge of the field of social work. Many of them did, however, have prior experiences working with clients through internships, work, or volunteering. In terms of client interactions, the law students noticed a difference between social work and legal interviewing styles. They also acknowledged that the team dynamic of a social work student and a law student working on a case together provided better outcomes for the client. Results showed that, although the clinic work was helpful, most law students did not think traditional law classes helped prepare them for client interactions. They expressed an openness and desire for more trainings on client interactions. Furthermore, many law students believed that there are benefits to an interdisciplinary class on social work skills, in that teaching social work skills to law students would improve their education and future practice. As Bronstien (2003) asserted, interdisciplinary education would help both fields to meet goals in the service to clients that they would not be able to alone.

Limitations

There are limitations that need to be addressed. The number of participating students was small, and they were law students from only one university. Therefore, those portrayed here are not necessarily representative of the general population of law students. The participants were taken from clinic courses and might be predisposed to wanting client interaction, which could have skewed the results as well. Future research should be conducted with a larger sample size including law students from multiple universities. Nevertheless, given that the focus of this study was to explore the law students' perspectives, the number of participating law students was adequate to examine the topic qualitatively.

Conclusion

How law students are educated affects how well their legal practices are in the future. If there are gaps in their education, it may mean there are also gaps in their practice. The law students in this study identified the gap in their education, which was a lack of knowledge on how to interact with clients. The law students also were open to the idea of interdisciplinary education with social work and were able to identify benefits of this education that would fill their current gaps. Therefore, findings suggest a need for interdisciplinary trainings to prepare law students for future practice.

References

- Boys, S. K., Quiring, S. Q., & Hagan, C. A. (2015). Social work skills can fill the gaps in legal education: Law student opinions of their preparation for practice with clients. *Legal Issues Journal*, 3 (1), 87-100. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.uakron.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edshol&AN=edshol.hein.journals.uklwetrew3.8&site=eds-live>
- Brandon, R. N., & Knapp, M. S. (1999). Interprofessional education and training: Transforming professional preparation to transform human services. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 42, 876–891.
- Bronstein, L. R. (2003). A model for interdisciplinary collaboration. *Social Work*, 48 (3). 297-306.
- Council on Social Work Education. (n.d.) *Directory of Accredited Programs*. Retrieved April 24, 2019, from <https://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/Directory-of-Accredited-Programs.aspx>
- Deck, P. (2016). Law and social work: Reconciling conflicting ethical obligations between two seemingly opposing disciplines to create a collaborative law practice. *Western New England Law Review*, 38 (2), 261-284. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.uakron.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edshol&AN=edshol.hein.journals.wnelr38.11&site=eds-live>
- Galowitz, P. (1999). Collaboration between lawyers and social workers: Re-examining the nature and potential of the relationship. *Fordham Law Review*, 67, 123–2154.

- Hagan, C. A., & Boys, S. K. (2015). Catching fire: A case study illustration of the need for an interdisciplinary clinical case partnership and resulting student successes. *Asian Journal of Legal Education*, 2 (1), 46-56. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.uakron.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edshol&AN=edshol.hein.journals.asjledu2.8&site=eds-live>
- Taylor, S. (2006). Educating future practitioners of social work and law: Exploring the origins of inter-professional misunderstanding. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 28 (6), 638-653.