
Instilling Purpose: Courses in Justice Need to be Part of Every Student's Legal Education

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I recently sat
in a room
overflowing
with law
students as
an attorney
friend
described a
15-year pro

bono project in which he represented a death row inmate who had not been afforded adequate representation. The captivated audience listened attentively while my friend reflected on the notion that legal professionalism should include public service and the quest for justice. The notion of a professional as being

someone dedicated to public service and to the provision of justice needs to receive more prominence in legal education.

For several decades, lawyers have bemoaned the fact that the profession has changed and become more like a business, concerned only with bottom lines and billable hours. The controversy surrounding this change coincides with reports of high attorney dissatisfaction with their jobs and roles as lawyers. In fact, Notre Dame law professor Patrick J. Schiltz recently wrote that lawyers are “among the most depressed people in America” with elevated levels of anxiety and hostility. He also catalogues surveys reporting on career dissatisfaction among lawyers.

Could this rise in attorney dissatisfaction be tied to the increased disconnection of the profession from its central obligation for public service and provision of justice? Certainly many lawyers work diligently through bar associations and other means to maintain that connection. But the emphasis on service and justice

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should not rest only in the province of the bar. As a profession we need to ask what legal educators are doing to instill this calling to justice in the next generation of lawyers. While the Association of American Law Schools (AALS), through several past presidents, has emphasized the role of law schools in access to justice

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and public service, legal education has been resistant to change.

Many students choose to attend law school because they are animated by an interest in justice, yet they graduate and ask, “Where was the class about justice?” All agree that justice needs to be a part of every law students’ legal education, but how can we ensure that justice doesn’t get lost in a thicket of doctrine and technical knowledge?

Questions about justice and the legal system are not a new issue for the profession. In 1918, Reginald Heber Smith linked equality of justice with freedom as “twin fundamental conceptions of American jurisprudence.” Echoing Heber Smith, President Jimmy Carter also charged that legal resources are not appropriately distributed. He

complained that “90 percent of our lawyers serve 10 percent of our people.”

The present urgency of the need for judicial system access and an assertion of the importance of studying justice issues in law school occur at a time when attacks on affirmative action in Texas, Michigan, and California have drastically affected the numbers of students of color enrolling in these law schools. Before these attacks, these public schools had been successful channels for bringing students of color into the legal profession. Studies show that people of color are more likely to serve communities that are disadvantaged and underrepresented, heightening the need to ensure that legal education is available to diverse populations. A commitment to justice in legal education helps ensure an environment that is welcoming to all students.

Several California law schools have established academic centers to begin to address the issue of justice and to ensure

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that justice is an important part of law students’ education. The University of California, Berkeley, established The Center for Social Justice; the University of California, Los Angeles, began a curricular program in public interest law and policy; the University of San Diego instituted a Center for Public Interest Law;

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and Santa Clara University founded The Center for Social Justice and Public Service. While these academic centers have varying missions, they share a common goal of ensuring that public service and the quest for justice become institutionalized within our law schools.

These centers also illustrate an important trend in legal education. Law schools recognize that business as usual has not provided the training and inspiration for the next generation of lawyers who will work on social justice and public interest issues, nor has it fulfilled its promise to instill a hunger for justice as part of every law student's professional education. These centers mark an important departure from this history of business as usual in legal education.

This departure has the potential for positive impact on the entire educational experience.

As one Boalt student commented: "The Center for Social Justice made me a more active participant in my first-year classes. I came to law school to learn how

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law relates to society. I've encountered challenging academic insights during Center for Social Justice events. My enthusiasm for these social justice topics carries over into my classes.”

Another reported that Center events “set the context for some honest talk

about practical things we students can do to confront race and gender issues in the classroom.” These students, the lawyers of the future, face the immediacy of social justice issues as part of their legal training.

In our increasingly diverse society, social justice is part of the professional responsibility of all attorneys. Practicing lawyers can share their knowledge and foster student enthusiasm by becoming involved with these centers. Forging an alliance between legal educators, practitioners, students, and communities can ensure that improving the lives of disadvantaged and underrepresented members of society remains integral to the lawyer's calling.

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