

Yes, You Can!: Course Collaboration for a Richer Learning Experience and Institutional Change

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The authors' poster will report on their collaboration efforts, using experiential learning to enrich their respective curriculums and their respective students' learning experiences. This collaboration is a major step towards effecting critically needed institutional change.

For decades law school faculty have been engaged in an ongoing debate about whether theoretical, casebook courses are more important than clinical skills-building courses. Even within the clinical ranks we hear debates about the relative importance of clinical/experiential courses versus legal writing/simulated drafting courses. The fact is that all these experiences are essential to a law student's education. Many, if not most, law faculty see the merit for each type of learning experience. However, because faculty are concerned that collaboration might infringe on their academic freedom or perhaps adversely affect their faculty status, their teaching efforts remain highly individualized. Students, though, are suffering from this compartmentalized approach to learning. First, they can encounter difficulties transferring the lessons learned in a course to either a real world situation or even another course. For example, students often have a difficult time transferring the motion or brief writing skills learned in a legal writing course to a clinical experience where they are drafting motions and briefs on behalf of clients. Second, because clinical skills-building courses are expensive, there is a tendency to offer fewer of these courses or fewer experiences.

The more law schools can provide clinical skills-building opportunities to students and the more schools can provide different settings to reinforce these skills, the more prepared our law students will be for law practice upon graduation. The way to provide these additional experiences without breaking the budget is to provide collaborative experiences between courses.

The authors have discovered that you can create a relatively low-key, low-prep collaboration while still respecting each collaborator's autonomy and academic freedom. There are numerous benefits to this type of collaboration. The collaborators gain a new level of understanding and appreciation for what is going on in other courses. Also, collaborators can come away from the experience with fresh ideas for their own curriculum and inject new life in their courses. But, most importantly, the students benefit from the additional experience.

The authors have joined together to create collaborative opportunities between their law school's civil practice clinic and a brief drafting course. Prior to collaboration, both authors met to discuss their students' respective needs and shared the pedagogy, goals, syllabi, and lesson plans for the respective courses. By sharing this information, the authors developed ways to incorporate new experiential learning opportunities for both sets of students in different contexts. For example, the brief-writing students work on issues commonly faced by the clinic students (e.g., child custody modification); the brief-writing students will also visit courts to observe proceedings. This experience gives the brief-writing students a sense of how issues addressed in their briefs have real world application. In turn, the clinic students will be judging the brief-writing students' oral arguments. This experience, giving clinic students an opportunity to experience the other side of the bench gives them insight into ways to effectively advocate their own clients' cases. The two best briefs from the brief-writing course that focus on issues often addressed in clinic cases will be placed on file in the clinic so that future clinic students will have access to these briefs to help jump-start their understanding of these issues and the law.

The poster will illustrate the steps to partnering, report on the authors' own collaborative experience, include recommendations on implementing this approach in other courses, and show how this type of collaboration can create positive outcomes for faculty and students, and facilitate institutional change.