



Van der Cruysse: What do Indiana law schools do for students in need?

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By Inge Van der Cruysse

Not unlike lawyers and judges, students are subject to stresses triggered by law school, their personal lives, and/or mental health issues, chemical dependencies and general obstacles to their well-being that can affect their legal education and their career. Law schools and their offices of Student Affairs are familiar with the increased challenges to their students' well-being. They staff offices with professionals who have law degrees and/or advanced degrees in counseling. These individuals have extensive student counseling training and experience. Support from Student Affairs specialists plays a major role in the success of a law student toward graduation, as their approach is holistic and considers the students' well-being in the academic, professional, personal and health context. The school's faculty and administration heavily rely on expertise and advice Student Affairs offers in addressing overall issues with regard to well-being in the classroom, or guidance and support of individual students through particularly challenging times.



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Previous articles in this series focused on challenges practicing lawyers face. They are more prone to depression and are "at greater risk for heart disease, alcoholism and drug use than the general population." These problems afflict law students as well. One study of law students found that "44% of law students meet the criteria for clinically significant levels of psychological distress" and report higher use of alcohol and drugs in their second and third year of law school. Compared to other demanding professional graduate programs, law students also have "significantly higher levels of stress, stress symptoms, and alcohol abuse," and the problems they suffer are tied directly to the law school experience. (Yale Journal of Law, "Stemming the Tide of Law Student Depression: What Law Schools Need to Learn from the Science of Positive Psychology," Vol. 2, 2009)

Law schools now offer programs to address students' needs that typically start with orientation and

continue throughout law school. At the start of the 1L year, the students at Indiana law schools are introduced to on-campus counseling, psychological services and mentoring support; to specific law school programs that address well-being; and to specialized services available to students in the community. Notre Dame Law School, for example, invited a psychology professor and renowned sleep expert to talk at its law school orientation about the importance of sleep in overall health. Valparaiso Law School has created a professionalism requirement that students attend at least one of multiple programs offered each semester. The series is designed to communicate the values of the legal profession and includes such topics as professional judgment, wellness, substance use disorders, diversity, communication skills and networking. Law schools offer this help to their students during law school and through graduation, with assistance that could include preparation for character and fitness interviews for the bar exam, support during the bar exam preparation, and referrals for background check interviews for certain government positions.

Mentoring programs for 1Ls — and in particular peer-mentoring such as the Practice Advisor Program at Indiana University Maurer School of Law where upper-division students are trained to engage in the career, academic and well-being development of the 1L students — have been successful at guiding students to the right services, but also at identifying programming that addresses students' needs in real time such as small sessions on self-care, the so-called “impostor syndrome,” and professional identity.

Programming in the Indiana law schools not only focuses on mental health and substance abuse issues, but also offers a wide array of opportunities for the students to address gender/ability/racial/sexual-orientation biases and specific challenges veterans face in law school, offers self-care packages and sessions, information on healthy nutrition, mindfulness teaching, and stress management sessions. The schools focus on diversity and inclusion issues which trigger additional law school stress to students affected by implicit and explicit biases, such as the Diversity Initiatives at Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law.

These services serve a short-term goal of supporting students to be successful in law school, but also assist long-term in helping them lay a foundation to follow a balanced work-life career path. The intent of law schools is to prepare students to become lawyers who know when and where to seek help when they deal with professional and personal stressors, mental health issues, or substance abuse issues. JLAP has partnered with the Indiana law schools to help fulfill these needs by offering educational programs in individual classes or at programs open to the entire student body to introduce its services to students. These programs have included topics such as “How and When to Call JLAP,” “Compassion Fatigue,” “What Law Students and Lawyers Need to Know about the Use of Alcohol and Drugs,” and “Resiliency in the Legal Profession.” Professors often invite JLAP to speak in a variety of classes but in particular to Professional Responsibility classes to bring the connection between attorney well-being and competent, ethical performance into their classrooms.

JLAP also participates in student health fairs, special events on campus, and frequently brings the JLAP therapy dogs to the law schools for stress relief during exams. JLAP offers one-on-one consultations to

students and is soon going to start scheduling a JLAP staff member to consult with students on campus once a month. Last year, JLAP and IU McKinney partnered with the American Bar Association's Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs to create a video to help law students understand that help is available and they do not have to suffer alone — whatever their stressors may be. The video is available to all law schools nationwide and may be seen on the JLAP website at in.gov/judiciary/ijlap/.

In the compact but intense experience of law school, law students are exposed to mental health, well-being and substance abuse challenges. These challenges are representative of those they will face throughout their legal career as practicing attorneys, and JLAP's partnership assists schools in bridging that transition. •

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