

Well-Being at the Law School

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A graduate of the University of New Mexico School of Law and having been privileged to serve as an adjunct professor there since 2010, I recognize that when I brag about my alma mater you might claim that I am not objective. But I doubt that I am the only one who recognizes the value in the Law School's state-of-the-art hands-on clinic, its reputation for having one of the most competitive tuition rates nationally, its attention to diversity, and its faculties' dedication to the students. Now the Law School can add its commitment to well-being to the list of things for which it can and should be exceedingly proud.

It's no secret that being in law school is not without its challenges; the workload is demanding, and most students are trying to balance school, a job, home, and a variety of other commitments. Additionally, there is the ever-looming prospect of taking the bar exam and finding meaningful employment after graduation. While some anxiety or apprehension is to be expected in the face of these demands, the Law School offers various resources, outlets, and strategies to students for dealing with all these demands and to help them find ways to integrate enjoyment and well-being into the students' experience at the Law School and beyond.

At the outset, the Law School offers what I would characterize as a common resource set, similar to the resources offered at many law schools around the nation. For example, the Law School provides access to a mental health counselor, 12-step meetings through the State Bar of New Mexico Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program, an informal peer-support network, social/peer clubs like the soccer club and the women's golf association, on-campus meditations and yoga classes, and an on-campus masseuse. On occasion, the Law School has arranged to have a therapy dog on campus, and has provided students with access to a wellness center and workout equipment. These resources mirror those offered at other law schools



including the University of Miami, Boston University, Stanford Law School, Yale, American University Washington College of Law, and many others.

Moreover, the Law School has set infrastructure in place to support continued well-being efforts, specifically, a Student Bar Association Well-being Committee which oversees, plans and implements well-being initiatives at the Law School, and a Fun Committee which has planned and presented a variety of fun events such as Arbitrary and Delicious (a community cooking show presented over Zoom), karaoke night, poetry reading, trivia night, and open mic night. Likewise, the Law School has collaborated with the State Bar of New Mexico to make counselling resources available to members of the Law School community through the State Bar Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program, and the Bar's Employee Assistance Program.

In addition to the resources described above, many law schools, including the Law School at UNM, have

also begun to discuss the concept of well-being within existing substantive courses, offering a session in the professional responsibility class, or weekend workshops devoted to the topic. But, perhaps one of the most significant things that the Law School at UNM has done to support its community members' well-being, is to expressly integrate the concept of well-being into the Law School's scholarship and curricula. For example, Professor Nathalie Martin has authored a book titled "Lawyering from the Inside Out: Learning Professional Development Through Mindfulness and Emotional Intelligence." Professor Martin submits that through mindfulness and emotional intelligence training, lawyers can improve their focus, productivity, interpersonal skills and, ultimately, their enjoyment of the practice of law. And Professor Martin does more than just write about the importance of well-being; she walks the walk. In addition to the many other things she does for the Law School community, she is a certified yoga instructor and teaches two yoga classes and a meditation class during the work week at the Law School's Wellness Center.

Professor Barbara Creel offers a 2 hour-credit course at the Law School titled "The Good Life and the Practice of Law." The course is founded on the premise that law students and lawyers can learn more from the field of positive psychology and neuroscience to integrate enjoyment into their lives through daily practice of what some experts call "brain training" or "rewirements." While the demands and stresses associated with law school and the practice of law are real and can be challenging, and the negative statistics related to law students' and lawyers' mental health and substance abuse are well-known, Professor Creel believes that law schools must directly address these challenges and dedicate time and space in their curricula to actually "do" well-being – not just talk about or recommend it. By using critical thinking and proven methods of self-care and awareness, Professor Creel seeks to promote a transformational change in the legal profession by focusing on lawyers as a sustainable human resource.

Devoting scholarship to well-being, teaching well-being to law students as a core concept in a for-credit course, and providing time and space in the curricula to "doing" well-being rather than just talking about it is, as one person commented, "next-level thinking." And integration is the key. Historically, the study and practice of law was one of the "silos" in a legal professional's

life. Well-being was treated as a separate silo which all-too frequently became another chore on the legal professional's to-do list. But by taking a more holistic, integrated, and action-oriented view of well-being, law students and lawyers can integrate well-being into their legal practice and find daily meaning, purpose, and joy in their work. Common sense tells us that legal professionals who integrate meaning, purpose and joy into their daily practices are undoubtedly more satisfied and, as a result, likely to be more effective law students and lawyers. In short, as Professor Creel phrases it, they are a more sustainable human resource.

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Knowing the administration, faculty, staff, and students and the Law School, I doubt that the well-being efforts discussed above will stop there. I would be unsurprised by even more integration of well-being into core curricula and scholarship by more professors, an expansion of on-campus well-being resources, increased collaboration with off-campus well-being providers and programs, and perhaps a more prominent presence on the Law School's website allowing faculty, staff, and students to easily

access all that is available to them. By building a solid well-being foundation for the next generation of lawyers the Law School is leading the way in integrating well-being into every lawyers' practice. And as I said at the top, it's always good to get an early start on something this important.

Endnotes

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