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Oscar J. Salinas

University of North Carolina School of Law, osalinas@email.unc.edu

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Law School Learning Communities: A Community of Learners for the Benefit of All Learners

By Oscar J. Salinas, University of North Carolina School of Law at Chapel Hill

Law School Transition – A Look Back

Like many first-year law students, I entered law school unaware of what truly lay ahead of me. I did not know many of my fellow classmates, and I did not have a true understanding and appreciation of the law school experience. Law school orientation may have been informative, and I may have performed relatively well as an undergraduate student. But, I still carried a level of anxiety and uncertainty as I walked inside that large lecture hall during the first few weeks of school. I had briefed my cases. I felt prepared for class. Yet, I was still amazed at how freely and willingly some of the other students interacted in the Socratic lecture. I questioned whether I was right for law school.

Despite my initial reservations as to whether I was going to excel in this new academic setting, I was able to adjust to the rigors of being a first-year law student. I made an appropriate transition from college to law school. However, there were several other students who were not as fortunate. For one reason or another, some students were unable to adapt to the law school learning process and feel like they truly “belonged” in law school. They may have struggled in adjusting their learning styles to the teaching preferences of their law school professors. They may have lacked confidence in their written and oral communication skills, which may have lead to additional feelings of inferiority in the law school lecture class. They may have needed additional time in a less intimidating atmosphere to critically

think about and organize their course material. They may have needed a learning community.

What are Learning Communities?

Although fairly new to law schools, Learning Communities (“LCs”) are quite popular in the undergraduate setting and have a variety of definitions and formats. Some universities utilize LCs to foster a safe learning environment for at-risk students, while other universities stress the importance of LCs for academic success and retention for all types of students.

Universities may structure their LCs based on a number of factors, including the students’ majors and career choices, residential quarters, and undergraduate records.

Prior to teaching at Carolina Law, I taught a variety of for-credit academic success Freshman Seminar LCs courses at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Some of my courses focused on at-risk students who may have had some deficiency in their academic records. Some of my other courses were designed for students whom the university admitted unconditionally to the university, yet who also needed some additional assistance in their transition to college. One of my courses included students who were all living in the same college dorm.

Goal = Transition

Although the student population for my LCs courses differed in age and maturity from law school students, the mission of the LCs program and the skills the students learn in the classroom transfer to law school academic support.

Generally, the goal of the LCs program in the undergraduate setting is to

provide students with the necessary tools and support to help freshman students make an appropriate transition from high school to college. LCs emphasize the development of a “community of learners” for the benefit of all

learners. They often include a cohort group of students (about 25) who take smaller, seminar classes that focus on cooperative and collaborative learning, academic skills, and self-reflection. The cohort is also all enrolled in the same larger substantive class, such as History, Political Science, or Geology. Faculty for the LCs courses utilize a variety of active learning techniques to motivate the students to participate and be proactive in the learning process, including problem-based questions, role-playing, pair and share learning, and group work.

Like many law school academic support courses or workshops, students in the smaller LCs seminar classes may learn about their learning styles, time and stress management, and how to outline, take notes, and prepare for exams. Students are encouraged to utilize the



— continued on page 29

Law School Learning Communities: A Community of Learners for the Benefit of All Learners

— continued from page 28

cooperative and collaborative learning techniques and academic support skills that are taught in the smaller seminar classes in their linked larger substantive class. Students can accomplish this goal in a variety of ways, including helping each other organize study groups, comparing class notes, and helping each other with exam preparation.

Legal Research and Writing LCs

Law schools interested in enhancing the learning environment for their students beyond academic support courses and workshops may consider utilizing their Legal Research and Writing (LRW) courses as law school LCs. Whether it is simply getting to know each other's names and backgrounds or having the students work collaboratively to answer a substantive question, providing an academic atmosphere where students feel respected and safe may be the pedagogical deviation that some law schools need to help students more successfully transition to law school.

Similar to the LCs cohort format, LRW students are usually in the same first-year section. They see each other multiple times throughout the entire week in their larger doctrinal classes. Similar to the LCs seminar courses, LRW classes are smaller, so the students are able to develop relationships with one another that are difficult to establish in the larger Socratic-style classes. By giving the students an opportunity to get to know and work with one another in their LRW courses, students can begin to identify and appreciate the benefits of shared learning, including diversity of opinions and values, as well as increased confidence and self-esteem. Students can

build trust in one another and develop relationships that will help them learn to learn from one another in the current semester and beyond.

Despite the traditional competitive nature of law school, students should feel comfortable and motivated to collaborate with one another to promote each other's academic success. Faculty teaching LRW LCs courses can be more proactive in encouraging students to utilize each other for assistance in their larger doctrinal classes. On their own or through partnership with the academic support office, LRW faculty can help eliminate the negative connotation that sometimes follows academic assistance by promoting and highlighting the benefits of learning from peers. Moreover, because of the smaller class size and interactive nature of the course, LRW faculty may even be able to help identify those at-risk students who may need more one-on-one academic counseling. In these circumstances, LRW faculty can help pave the way for an earlier intervention from academic support personnel and, potentially, reduce the number of students who drop out because of poor grades or feelings of inadequacy and despair.

Learning Styles and LRW LCs

Law school academic support and other law teachers have long advocated for law school teaching that reaches a variety of learning styles. LRW LCs may help establish an environment where a variety of learning styles can thrive.

Collaborative LRW LCs may be most beneficial for those interpersonal learners who prefer to process information in a more social setting. However, LRW LCs

should also benefit students who lack the extroverted or "out-spoken" personality traits that often seem to dominate the Socratic lectures. Allowing non-verbal learners an opportunity to more critically think about the topics they are learning while working in a less intimidating classroom setting may be the encouraging and motivating factors that will enable the students to gain more confidence in their oral communication skills. Likewise, providing the skills-based instruction that many LRW professors already implement in their curriculum (such as case management, mediation, and interviewing and counseling) should enhance the learning experience for kinesthetic and visual/spatial learners, who prefer hands-on work or additional time to visually create a mental image of what they are trying to learn.

Conclusion

Law schools interested in assisting students in their transition to law school should look to the success and popularity of undergraduate LCs. By identifying ways to enhance confidence and relationship building, and by encouraging cooperative and collaborative learning, LRW LCs may help students feel as if they "belong" and can excel in law school. This approach may lead students to perform better academically, have better bar passage rates, and, generally, have a better transition to law school.

Oscar J. Salinas is clinical assistant professor of law at the University of North Carolina School of Law at Chapel Hill. He can be reached at osalinas@email.unc.edu.