Building a Public Health Law and Policy Curriculum to Promote Skills and Community Engagement

Amy T. Campbell

Introduction
As a fellow in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-supported faculty fellowship program on the future of public health law education,1 I began the development of a specialized track for a public health law longitudinal curriculum that would cut across disciplines as it moved from foundational knowledge to skills development to community-engaged service learning. This curriculum develops five dimensions over time.

First, the core foundation course is a new public health law course offered through the law school, which provides the doctrinal base on which to build the other dimensions. This foundational public health law course was offered for the first time in spring 2014 and again in the spring of 2015 to law students, with plans to open up the course to public health students in spring 2016. Second, a new Health Policy Practicum, created and piloted in fall 2014, emphasizes skills development. Discussed in more detail below, the Practicum pairs teams of students with community partners to help address policy barriers to community health and includes a weekly seminar (classroom) component.

Third, a community-immersion component will be developed to enhance our health-related externships in non-profit legal agencies or legal departments. A weekly seminar will combine law students in these health-related externships with public health students taking their practicums in order to promote interdisciplinary learning and discussion. Fourth, to offer students the opportunity to see how to make systemic changes in law and policy related to public health, a Policy Lab is envisioned to be a community/regional resource for policy research, advising, and drafting in support of health, as broadly conceived. It will be housed at the law school but draw on other university and external experts (e.g., public health, urban planning, public administration, anthropology, social work, and health care economics). Fifth, an overall goal of my fellowship project was to foster more understanding and collaborative work across our university campus with respect to the role that the law school can play in interdisciplinary education related to health and to develop channels to build future interdisciplinary courses.

While laying the foundations for the third and fourth curricular dimensions, I focused during my fellowship year both on successfully implementing the second curricular component, the Health Policy Practicum, and on paving the way for fostering the fifth dimension, interdisciplinary education between law and health-related disciplines at the university. The Practicum was piloted in fall 2014 with nine law students. Its emphasis was to serve the newly-formed Healthy Homes Partnership (the “Partnership”) in the City of Memphis. The Partnership had evolved from discussions among the Institute for Health Law and Policy at the law school, the experiential learning program at the law school, and Le Bonheur Children’s Hospital, a major children’s hospital within the City of Memphis. The Partnership has a federally-funded CHAMP (Changing High-Risk Asthma in Memphis through Partnerships) Program to serve children with high-risk asthma who routinely go to the emergency department for acute care of their asthma.

Amy T. Campbell, J.D., M.B.E., is the Director of the Institute for Health Law & Policy and an Associate Professor at the Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law at the University of Memphis. She was a Fellow in the 2014-2015 faculty fellowship program known as The Future of Public Health Law Education, which was supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to Georgia State University College of Law and its Center for Law, Health & Society.
Through CHAMP, community health workers now conduct in-home visits to provide training and support for families. While in these homes, primarily rental properties within certain city zip codes, the workers witnessed mold and other substandard housing issues frustrating their clinical and community-based interventions’ success, and necessitating legal interventions to achieve health goals. A goal of the Practicum is to allow students to explore how legal/policy expertise could address these sorts of housing-code and other policy-related issues impeding health.

During fall 2014, the students served as research assistants to the Partnership, which now includes city and county health, housing, and planning representatives, local HUD representatives, and representatives from across sectors, including urban planning, community development, and nonprofit health and housing advocates. Teams of three students served the three different working groups: (1) policy/code amendment and development, (2) health in housing survey, and (3) community education/advocacy. Each team was assisted by a community point person who helped develop real-world projects for students as related to their workgroup areas, e.g., drafting a memo detailing best practices around rental permit registries, developing a report joining data to potential policy recommendations, and developing advocacy materials. Two-hour seminars were also held each week, supplying background context, expert speakers, policy-making skills sessions, and opportunities for brainstorming and discussion within and across teams.

The term ended with presentations to Partnership representatives sharing status of work-to-date. Students were assessed on legislative and regulatory drafting assignments, team presentations and team memos explaining their work, as well as individual memos discussing growth and lessons learned about interdisciplinary policy work. Quality of teamwork, including peer and community contact assessments, also informed final grades.

Benefits
The pilot of the Health Policy Practicum was very successful, as were ground-laying efforts to promote interdisciplinary education between law and health-related disciplines across campus. These curricular developments have benefitted our students, our university, and our community partners alike.

For Students
Through the weekly Practicum seminars, and most especially meetings with community stakeholders, the students gained appreciation for the invaluable sources of expertise on which to build and with whom to partner far beyond the legal community, including epidemiologists, code enforcement workers, community development coalition leaders, health workers, urban planners, and community-based nonprofit leaders. They also developed an invaluable perspective by talking with parents and families themselves, including during a required home site visit through which pairs of students went with our CHAMP Community Liaison to visit a CHAMP family and witness firsthand the housing- and neighborhood-based concerns. Students highlighted this visit as a particularly beneficial experience and an important way to ground what was to follow throughout the course. Meeting with and presenting to such a mix of disciplines and sources of expertise also pushed students to explain legal concepts in lay terms and to consider how this expertise could help inform the law’s approach. They also benefited from gaining understanding of the oft-times slow nature of

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policy change, and witnessing how coalitions are built and sustained — and lawyers’ roles in such — to keep momentum towards that change.

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For the Academy

The university has been strategically thinking about how to emphasize “health” across disciplines, and the Health Policy Practicum was good fit for this vision. There is also a renewed focus on how the University of Memphis can be for Memphis. This is reflected in the university’s Strengthening Communities Initiative (SCI) grant program, which funds faculty-community projects to enhance engaged scholarship and service learning. Working with Le Bonheur and our CHAMP colleagues, we secured for the Healthy Homes Partnership an 18-month SCI Grant, whose monies have facilitated initial meetings and advocacy and healthy homes environmentalist trainings. The Practicum served as the engaged learning part of this Initiative, and monies are also helping support two law student summer researchers. This fellowship project has thus built on an increasing university emphasis on health-related programs and has helped open the door to the law school’s engagement across the campus and into the community. Overall, the good will generated during the fellowship year through these efforts across a campus increasingly committed to interdisciplinary education, scholarship, and service has paved the way for meaningful interdisciplinary engagement that includes the law school and our faculty and students.

Ongoing strategic planning at the law school emphasizes the development of “practice-ready” lawyers, including through enhanced experiential offerings. The Practicum also builds on this goal, broadening the conception of how lawyers can engage beyond individual advocacy to systemic change (not unlike the goals of public health to move from individual to population health). This project has deepened the understanding of “practice-ready” to include, in addition to applied technical and analytic skills, the skills of interdisciplinary engagement, coalition-building, and shared partnership. A “process” benefit from the fellowship project has been in laying the groundwork for a curriculum that contains the building blocks toward “practice-ready” students — i.e., building from doctrinal courses to skills-development courses to embedded learning with reflective seminars.

Finally, the Healthy Homes Partnership has been a golden opportunity for engaging with and in the community. We have effectively partnered with Le Bonheur, especially its Community Health and Well-Being Division (on the health system side), as well as with the Shelby County Health Department (on the public health system side). Moreover, we have partnered with housing-code and other housing-related officials at the local, county, and federal levels to better understand and work through policy issues and barriers. Our faculty and students have listened to government officials discuss opportunities and barriers. And we have partnered with community development and related non-profit community-based entities to match policy knowledge with on-the-ground, real-world issues, needs, values, and assets to which to bring policy advising and support. The Institute’s leading role within the Partnership — which dovetails with City/County efforts to address blight and builds on interest in community development and a reorientation towards community and preventive health among health systems — has resulted in increased recognition of the Institute as a go-to resource for policy advising, law student research assistance, and convener of community conversations.

For the Community

Reflective of the community’s excitement over the formation of the Healthy Homes Partnership, a formal public kickoff event was held on January 15, 2015, featuring City of Memphis Mayor A C Wharton as the keynote speaker. To honor the Partnership, the Mayors of the City of Memphis and Shelby County issued a joint proclamation naming the day as “Healthy Homes Day” in Memphis. Students who had taken the Practicum during the previous fall semester were formally recognized at the kickoff, further cementing the Institute’s interest in service learning. One of our key community stakeholders observed afterwards, “There is no doubt in my mind that by going through the course, Professor Campbell is producing more socially conscious change agents that will serve the community with empathy, unbiased thought, and compassion.”
Challenges
A major challenge I faced while developing the Health Policy Practicum was how to ensure we do not oversell how much the students can accomplish and over what timespan, in order to not overcommit and disappoint and frustrate community stakeholders. I have increasingly recognized how important it is to have sustained conversations across stakeholder groups to get to the heart of what various groups need and seek, and to see whether and how this connects to community health and areas where we can, and should, be of assistance. I add the “should” recognizing the non-partisan nature of what we seek to achieve and the process we seek to follow. If we become seen as politically aligned, we undercut our “neutral platform” messaging and assistive role in navigating systemic change; partisanship could also negatively impact the sorts of projects and “outcomes” to which we can reasonably commit. As the Partnership has shown us, however, when the community’s health — especially of its children — is the motivation and desired ultimate outcome of collaborative efforts, this common goal can transcend political parties, different government sectors, different interest groups, and the like.

Another more technical challenge was educating students about how to effectively work with community partners who have multiple demands on their time (i.e., may be able to meet only at night or on weekends), and who have varying understandings of what the law is or policy’s role in meeting health-related needs. To this we continue to preach patience and the importance of working in coalitions like the Partnership, which can maintain momentum as students cycle through. A challenge for me will be to see how to most effectively handle the typically short-term (semester-long) nature of student assistance and the inevitable variation in skills and abilities across students.

Lessons Learned
What I have learned from my fellowship experience is how hungry a community like Memphis is for support, and also how, with patience and by serving in ways that match a community agenda, law can emerge as an invaluable resource to support the community. I have learned the power of the words “service learning,” and seen how embedding learning in a community can have rewards for students in ways far richer and deeper than solely traditional coursework. On the flip side, I have learned once the doors are open, how quickly ideas and opportunities may start to rise, which leads to challenges: balancing priorities, preserving space for an emphasis on student learning within community coalition efforts, and not overcommitting or overselling. It is exciting to be fully on the radar screen across campus and in our region; it is rather daunting to see how quickly that screen can fill in and start to get a bit blurry.

Another lesson learned is the importance of remaining a relatively neutral forum, as well as one able to promote conversations in such a way as to support meaningful, interdisciplinary collaboration in which we are all willing to cede a bit of authority and control for a greater good. An additional lesson learned is that this kind of successful interdisciplinary collaboration will require more training in negotiation and conflict management skills for our students.

A final lesson learned is that these various curricular dimensions take longer to build than I had at first imagined. During the summer institute at the outset of the fellowship program, my mentor and others encouraged me to focus on building a few dimensions during the fellowship year, and not try to achieve all of them at once. Rome wasn’t built in a day, as they say, and it was good advice to go a bit slower to ensure that every building block in the longitudinal curriculum will be laid with a solid and lasting foundation.

Impact: My Own Professional Development
Professionally, this fellowship program has brought about many positive developments for me. It has given me a solid identity within the law school, the university, the community, and beyond. It has been gratifying that this identity also fully embraces my own passions and pedagogical beliefs. Being in the fellowship program has given me the courage to stick to implementing the Practicum, when it was rather different from our other curricular offerings.

The fellowship program has also reinforced my commitment to formally launching our Institute as “iHeLP” (a descriptive acronym for our Institute for Health Law and Policy), with a mission of law and policy advancing health, and a core philosophy that students learn most by doing, and learn best by serving. I have had to develop, and benefited from developing, leadership skills to promote our work within and beyond the law school; to be part of multi-stakeholder leadership discussions about health and policy and begin to represent the law school at these meetings; and to more fully commit to my enduring passion for and strong belief in service learning as critical to health law education.

The Future: Plans and Next Steps
I am continuing to promote interdisciplinary education between law and health-related disciplines across our campus. With approval to launch a formal J.D./M.P.H. dual degree program, we are also now able to
open up our foundational public health law course and the Health Policy Practicum to both law and public health students, and hopefully will be able to incorporate students from other disciplines (e.g., social work, medicine) over time.

Also on my horizon for the future is the development of a Policy Lab, which will offer opportunities for interdisciplinary policy research, drafting, and advising related to health. This new Policy Lab will help achieve the Institute's service mission, which extends the Institute's reach into the community where the Institute endeavors to address unmet health law issues of local organizations and communities, host community forums on health law and policy issues, and work with community leaders to proactively address health policy needs. To manifest this mission, and link our service goals to unique possibilities for education and scholarship, the Policy Lab will spark an academic/public/private partnership in support of systemic change initiatives that seek to make Memphis a healthier community through policy. The Policy Lab's increasingly frequent mention in community meetings and warm reception is reinforcing the need and potential for such an entity, as its structure and possible funding opportunities are developed. It also presents the opportunity for a select group of students to gain longer-term (a year or two) engagement, which will help to build the all-important trust between students and community stakeholders, something that does not come with a two-week or even semester-long student assignment.

I have recently been asked to be part of the Shelby County Health Department's leadership team addressing infant mortality, a team which now more fully emphasizes the critical role for policy and how lawyers can help drive health promotion. Also, recent discussions with the Institute's Advisory Board members have led to additional opportunities to bring a systemic change perspective and skillset to issues in the forefront of local discussions, such as youth violence, adverse childhood experiences, childhood obesity, and food insecurity. These developments may lead to Policy Lab projects for law students and faculty, in consultation with other disciplinary experts. I envision the Policy Lab as an ongoing support and bedrock for the public health law longitudinal curriculum, as well as a critical resource locally and regionally around systemic change, with a natural focus on urban issues.

The successful launch of the Partnership and the student engagement through the Practicum this past year also served as powerful “proof of concept” for the value of developing alliances between the legal and health professions. Through continued collaboration and trust-building, the law school’s Dean has recently created a three-year funded Visiting Assistant Professor position to help formally launch a new medical-legal partnership clinic at the law school, to be called Memphis CHiLD (Children’s Health Law Directive). This clinic will enhance our ability for interdisciplinary education, and more broadly, it will be a strong addition to the longitudinal public health law curriculum, especially as we combine individual client advocacy in the clinic with the systems-change orientation of the Practicum.

In sum, this fellowship year has proven how much can be accomplished within the walls of the legal academy when it opens its doors and not simply welcomes others in, but purposefully walks through those doors to engage with communities with the aligned goals of fostering learning and enhancing community health by serving with and alongside a broad range of disciplinary experts and the community itself. In breaking the divide between doctrine and practice, and marrying “hard” and “soft” skills, initiatives such as these represent the critical tools to open doors and effectively, meaningfully engage to truly use law to advance health.

References

2. The course syllabus and the legislative drafting exercise with teacher's explanatory memo may be found at Network for Public Health Law, “Public Health Law Faculty Teaching Resources,” available at <https://www.networkforphl.org/faculty_teaching_resources/> (last visited January 8, 2016) (this site is password protected; faculty may request a password from the Network on this site) (see “Health Policy Practicum” in the Syllabi section and “Legislative Drafting Exercise” in the Case Studies section of this website).
4. Personal communication from Christina Watkins-Bolden, Supervisor of Community Collaborations, Le Bonheur Children’s Hospital, to author, April 27, 2015.