The Importance of Including the Deans

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Introduction
When Professor Charity Scott called me (over two years ago) to ask if I would work with her to develop and implement a new Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)-funded project to increase public health law curricula and learning opportunities at schools of law and public health through a fellowship program, I jumped at the chance. Not only would it give me the opportunity to work with Charity and the team that she had put together, but it was a chance to do something new and different and potentially make an impact on this area of law. I was engaged to serve as the “deans’ consultant” for the project, acting as a liaison between the project and deans (or associate deans) at the schools from which the fellows were selected. Charity shared with me during our initial conversation that because RWJF wanted to see the curricular changes and innovations developed by the fellows embedded at their home institutions and sustained over time, the Foundation insisted the deans be incorporated into the fellowship program. This requirement, in hindsight, as one of the deans said, was “a stroke of genius.”

I was comfortable serving in the role of deans’ consultant as I had been an associate dean for 12.5 years and had served as director of the Law & Health Care Program for 14 years at my home institution. It would later become clear that my experience having taught an interdisciplinary course including students from schools of law, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, social work, and public health would also be valuable background.

The deans were included in the project from the start. Any faculty member applying for the fellowship program had to include his or her dean’s “Letter of Support.” That letter ensured that the deans knew that the faculty member was applying to the program and what the faculty member was proposing to do in terms of curricular innovations. The letter also indicated that the dean or his/her associate dean would attend the first two-and-a-half days of the summer institute in Park City, Utah.

Once the fellows were selected, it became clear who the deans were that would be attending the summer institute in Park City. They included three deans of schools of public health (one of whom was an associate dean), six deans of law schools (two of whom were associate deans), and one dean of a school of social work.

The Summer Institute
While I participated in the planning of the ten-day summer institute, my focus was on the content of the first two-and-a-half days when the deans would be attending. Our goals for these initial days were to educate the deans about the value of public health law and how their fellow’s curricular innovation might bring benefits to their school and/or university and to their students. We also hoped that by being exposed to the ambitious goals of their fellows, the deans would support them by ensuring they would have the time they needed to devote to the project and/or by assisting them with negotiations they might need to have with faculty or administrators at other schools within their
institutions, e.g., if at a law school, that might include negotiations with the university’s schools of public health, medicine, nursing, social work, or business. Like any other new course or clinic, the curricular proposals would likely benefit students by exposing them to a new area of substantive law, but because many of the proposals had an interdisciplinary or experiential component, there were other potential opportunities for the home institution.

With this background in mind, we included the following components in the first two days of the summer institute:

- **Leadership forum:** During this session a university president engaged in a dialogue with a dean of a law school and dean of a school of public health about the future of higher education in the 21st century. The conversation focused on the challenges and opportunities for interprofessional education and collaboration and how public health law is a strong vehicle for meeting them.

- **Panel of practicing public health professionals and attorneys:** This session included a series of presentations by public health professionals and attorneys practicing public health law at places like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. They discussed what they do and why they do it and why schools of law and public health should teach public health law to ensure a well-educated public health workforce in the 21st century.

- **Conversation with RWJF:** In this session the senior vice president and director of the health group at RWJF provided an overview of the Foundation’s commitment to creating a culture of health and building the field of public health law. While deans of schools of public health would be familiar with RWJF, we wanted to expose deans of law schools to the Foundation and its mission and goals.

- **Roundtables on careers in public health law:** With job opportunities for law school graduates diminishing, we felt it would be beneficial to include information for the deans about opportunities for employment in the public health law field. During this session, representatives from federal, state, and local governments and not-for-profit organizations talked about their needs for public health lawyers and practitioners who are well educated in public health law.

- **Program academy – innovations:** In this session, which we arranged as “poster presentations,” we had program mentors and members of the program core staff present innovations in public health law education that they had implemented at their home institutions. These included examples of experiential and inter-professional opportunities.

In addition to these sessions, we included time for each fellow to briefly present his/her proposed curricular innovation so that all the deans would have a sense of the variety of curricular changes that were being proposed. After these presentations we created space in these initial days for small group meetings where the program mentors would meet with their two fellows and their deans to further discuss the fellows’ projects, their plans and concerns, their home institution’s support, and what they hoped to focus on and get out of the summer institute. Finally, we allowed time for a “Dean’s Forum” and asked each dean to come prepared to discuss three issues: (1) the opportunities offered by their fellow’s projects at their home institutions, (2) the challenges the fellows may face and how the deans could help in overcoming them, and (3) other perspectives the deans had gained from the institute for enhancing public health law education at their home institutions.

Initial feedback from the deans revealed that to a large extent our goals for their participation in the institute were met. They were able to articulate why public health law was an important area for their school to include in its curriculum as well as some of the opportunities the project presented for their institution. In terms of what was most beneficial about the institute, several of the deans mentioned learning about the field of health law more generally; others said they came away with a realization of the importance of interdisciplinary teams in addressing complex public health problems we face as a society and “how public health, science, and law can have synergies.”

One dean (from a school of law) talked about how the project and her time in Park City expanded her baseline knowledge of “a need for folks with expertise in [public health law]” and this area as a new career path for law students. “Our school,” she said, “has always had a mission to do public service and many of our students go into public interest jobs and this fits right in. We had not explored this career path for our students before this opportunity.” Another dean (from a school of public health) said that “for me, Park City was very useful as it reinforced the purpose for this whole program and made clear the iterative process that RWJF has used to put resources into public health law. My time in Park City was very practical and useful. In the context of what my fellow was doing,
it was a wake-up call for me to be more involved and aware of his role in our school and his position on campus and role with the school of law.”

**The Role of the Deans**

We hoped the deans would take back what they learned from the summer institute to their home institution and continue to be involved with their fellow’s project. The deans were told that I would be reaching out to them during the course of the academic year to find out their perspective on how their fellow was progressing with the implementation of his/her project. In follow up, I interviewed each of the deans at the end of the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semesters.

During the fall 2014 semester, most of the fellows were busy planning for implementation of their new course. In addition to finalizing the course design, this often included obtaining curriculum committee approval from one or more schools, establishing connections and working relationships with local public health departments, establishing a time to offer the course that would be conducive to students from different schools, figuring out how students from different schools could register for the course and how tuition issues would be resolved, advertising the course at multiple schools, and securing sufficient enrollment to offer the course. At the end of this semester I asked deans what progress their fellow had made, whether their fellow was facing any significant challenges, and whether the fellow’s work was fitting in with goals that the dean and the faculty of the school had for their institution.

During the spring semester virtually all of the fellows implemented their projects or some portion of their projects. At the conclusion of this semester I asked each dean how well the dean thought the fellow had implemented the project the fellow had envisioned, what impact the project had on the dean low was facing any significant challenges, and whether the deans were a consistent source of support for their fellows.

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From these interviews it was clear that overall the deans were a vital part of the program for at least three reasons:

1. In a number of cases they became an ally and advocate (and sometimes defender) for their fellow in dealings with their own school’s faculty, with the administration at other schools, and with the larger university when issues of scheduling, tuition, or course registration became an obstacle.
2. They were able to see the opportunities and benefits the fellowship presented to their institution and take advantage of those opportunities when dealing with internal and external constituents.
3. They were often in a better position than the fellow to ensure that the initiative would be sustained at their institution.

**Ally, Advocate, and Defender**

Overall the deans were a consistent source of support for their fellows. In some cases, deans generously gave their fellow a reduced teaching load, release time, or reduced administrative responsibilities; in others, although the fellows had no release from teaching or other commitments, their deans provided assistance when it came to helping their fellow obtain approvals from the university and/or other schools. One dean, for example, helped her fellow negotiate with university officials to offer the course at a time that was conducive to enrolling students from several schools. Another dean (from a school of public health) stepped in to assist allowing law students from a different university to take courses at her institution without applying for admission to her university. Two deans agreed to let students from other schools take the fellow’s course at their institution without receiving the tuition dollars from those students. This was very helpful to the fellows getting an interdisciplinary enrollment for their courses.

In some cases deans (particularly deans of law schools) became defenders of their fellow implementing their project at their school. They reported that some of their faculty expressed concerns about implementing this new addition to the curriculum when the school’s resources were being stretched very thin. They spoke of a reduced student body, of downsizing their faculty, and of faculty having to teach more courses and take on more responsibilities rather than less. They shared that some of their faculty viewed a new interdisciplinary public health law course as a luxury in a time of austerity and that they (the deans) were having to assure faculty that the course and moving in this direction made sense for multiple reasons, including the need for law students and lawyers to learn to work in multidisciplinary teams and that the new initiative offered ways to enhance the reputation of the law school in the eyes of both the university and the broader community. A number mentioned that the course and doing more in public health law was consistent with their school’s strategic plan that called for more emphasis on experiential learning and identified health law as a growth area that the law school should expand.

**Seeing the Bigger Picture and Other Opportunities**

One dean I spoke with summed up the added value of having the deans involved in the program by saying,
“I think the advantage of having college leadership involved is that [they] tend to think about sustainability and the bigger picture not just this one project.” This was evident from conversations I had with many of the deans. Virtually all were able to see how this project could be leveraged or be the jumping off point for other initiatives. Many saw its value as an example of the kinds of interdisciplinary initiatives their schools or institutions could take or of the types of connections that their school was making with the community. As one dean said, “This project allowed us to get out into the community and develop relationships we otherwise would not have. For example, we got our Chancellor to attend a meeting with local hospital officials to talk about how we could collaborate better to keep them updated on what they are required to do in the public health area, e.g., privacy, emergencies.” Her fellow’s focus on Ebola raised interest on the part of university leadership and hospital personnel. Those deans with significant institutional memory were able to see the possibility of building on prior relationships or for connecting anew with institutions where there historically had not been an ongoing collaboration.

Several deans also shared how the fellowship project was a catalyst for other public health law initiatives and collaborations between different schools and community organizations. For example, one dean realized the benefit to her institution of opening the course that was being offered by her fellow to county or city public health officials: it would both enhance the reputation of the law school as well as provide a valuable educational opportunity for public health officials. Two deans spoke about how the project led to them either establishing a new medical-legal partnership (MLP) at their school or participating in an existing medical-legal partnership. For example, one dean at a school of public health and her fellow realized their school could potentially add an evaluation component to an existing MLP that included their affiliated academic medical center and the local legal services association. The MLP collaboration was not part of her fellow’s proposal, but the idea for it came out of the institute in Park City. The fellow is now exploring funding to engage in some novel evaluation of services provided by the MLP, looking not only at patient outcomes but also at economic benefits to the health care system such as reducing repeat admissions for the same diagnosis. A second dean also shared that his fellow’s project laid the foundation for a new MLP with the local hospital. In establishing the MLP, his law school and the hospital shared the costs of hiring a visiting professor for three years. This person will devote two-thirds of her time to the MLP and one-third of her time to teaching at the law school. The dean was very pleased with this arrangement as it expanded the school’s teaching resources.

A number of deans spoke about the value of the fellowship project as an example of a new way of teaching or providing legal services when talking to potential donors or state legislators, to university leadership, or even to their faculty. For example, one law school dean said:

My mantra as dean has been that we are educating the whole lawyer to deal with the whole client, that legal services must be contextualized, that lawyers have to be able to work in an interdisciplinary way. Now, here comes my fellow with this interdisciplinary course she is creating. I now have one more concrete example I can point to for my philosophy of a contextualized, interdisciplinary, team approach to legal work. Also, the project is sensitizing our faculty to law as a social determinant of health. It’s allowed us to revisit the role of lawyers and their contributions to the public’s health. The project has worked pretty smoothly into our conversations about MLPs and strengthened our conversations about health law related initiatives.

That same dean saw the advantages to communicating about her fellow’s course to her alumni, to students applying to her school, to a potential donor, and to her faculty as part of faculty development. “I could see that this project would be of interest to a donor, but even if it’s not for this specific project, it will likely be helpful as an example for us to show our commitment to this area and to show a donor the innovative kinds of courses we are offering.”

One dean talked about how she used the example of her fellow’s project when speaking with her president and university leadership. She mentioned that her university was going through a strategic planning process and that as part of that process the university leadership talked a great deal about the university’s mission. “Our fellow’s project,” she said, “really fit into this well. In fact there was a lot of focus on his project as what we (the university and law school) should be doing more of. We were able to showcase our fellow’s work.” This dean also said she used her fellow’s project as an example many times when speaking to external constituencies. She also saw the project as a way to combat some of the criticisms of law schools and that it was good for communicating with alumni and employers about how the law school is preparing students for practice.
Two deans (from law schools) talked about how they thought the fellowship was enhancing the reputation of their school within the legal community and their broader community. One mentioned that his school had spent the year doing strategic planning and that part of the school’s focus was on things that will be helpful to their city. They want to make the city a better place to live and work. “The kinds of things [our fellow] is doing,” he said, “are extremely helpful in that effort.” He also mentioned that the public health focus and defining health more broadly than medical and hospital care has been a help to the school in making more connections with the community. He and his faculty are thinking more about other things they are doing as related to public health and talking about them more this way to the community, e.g., they have a clinic that is focused on cleaning up blighted property and are beginning another clinic on improving the juvenile justice system. They are thinking about both of these clinics as relevant to public health. He related that his fellow’s work had raised the school’s profile locally as well as within the university; that the university wants to do things to help the city and has identified health as an area where it could make a difference. The dean felt that the fellowship had been helpful in making the law school a major player in that effort.

Sustaining the Initiative
Several deans were instrumental in thinking about how the fellow’s initiative would be sustained. One dean mentioned that the initiative would likely be integrated into their J.D.-M.P.H. joint degree. Several deans (from law schools) saw that the project could be counted as fulfilling a requirement for receipt of their institution’s health law certificate or other certificate program. A dean from a school of public health said that her school was interested in establishing a track in law and ethics and that the course on public health law could fit well within that track.

Another dean, from a law school, mentioned that her school had been “pretty deeply engaged this year in articulating [the school’s] learning objectives and mapping [its] curriculum to see where those objectives are achieved. As that kind of culture takes root more students will be looking for classes that satisfy those learning objectives. That kind of curricular guidance,” she said, “will push more students into this kind of learning environment, i.e., the kind that [her fellow] is creating with her interdisciplinary course.”

Some deans spoke about how the fellowship motivated them to establish something bigger than the fellow’s project that would be sustained at the university level. One dean (from a school of public health), after coming back from Park City, reached out to the dean of the law school at his home institution to discuss how the two schools could work together. He said they both see public health law as a viable focus for the future and have met several times to discuss possible models for collaboration including bringing in other partners. He would like to involve others at the university who are doing public health law or policy work, e.g., those in the College of Food & Agriculture or in the Engineering School. This dean elaborated saying that the “whole idea of public health law didn’t click for him until he was in Park City,” but that now he sees it as a way to improve access to care.
Conclusion
RWJF, which funded the public health law fellowship program, had great foresight in insisting that the program implementers include the deans of the fellows’ institutions in the fellowship program. Their participation was key in getting “buy in” of the fellow’s home institution. In addition to this general buy in, the deans were able to serve as allies, advocates, and, in some cases, defenders of their fellows. They were also able to see the potential connections of the project to other things going on at their university and in their communities and were helpful, and hopefully will continue to be helpful, in seeing that the project continues at their school.

In addition, at least for law school deans, participation in the summer institute and project changed the lens through which they view some of their school’s other initiatives — now, they are not only vehicles for improved access to legal services or to justice but for addressing social determinants of health. The fellowship program provided them with a new language with which to talk to leaders interested in public health and health care. Similarly, some of the deans of schools of public health and social work now see law in a new light as being an important tool to bring about positive public health outcomes. Finally I think all the deans see the benefits of collaboration between law and public health to bring about new interdisciplinary educational programs and initiatives that lead to real reforms and improvements in our public health infrastructure.

References
3. For a list of the mentors, see Scott, supra note 1, at note 19.
4. For a list of the members of the program team, see id., at note 12.
5. The author conducted individual interviews with each of the deans mid-way through and at the end of the fellowship year. The deans have granted permission to the author to use excerpts from those interviews in this essay.