

Some Words to the Wise about Law Students – for Community Groups Considering a Collaboration

This handout is written for groups that are thinking about agreeing to work with a law student on a law-related community project. Its purpose is to give you and your group some information that will help you understand law students better, and will put you in a better position to plan and benefit from working with them.

Most law students are basically well-intentioned, smart and responsible. However, they are also functioning in a pretty stressful environment and are more or less getting their heads pickled in a process that makes them feel and sometimes act like they are in a different world from other people. In addition, many of them do not have previous experience working with community-based grassroots organizations, and they are not necessarily familiar with the kinds of issues and challenges such groups must deal with.

So there is a need on both sides to better understand each other, and my hope is that this handout will provide you with information that will help you plan your work and build your relationship with a law student in a way that feels good and pays off for both of you. When collaborations between community groups and law students go well, they can be inspiring and even life-changing for the students, and of course good collaborations can produce concrete benefits for community organizations as well. But good partnerships do not just happen. I hope that the information below will help you plan and build a good one. Here are a few observations about law students:

1. Law students often have busy schedules that are not very flexible.

Most law students lead pretty chopped-up lives. Their classes meet in little segments that are sprinkled across the week -- sometimes at intervals from early morning until late in the evening, with small chunks of time in between. Once they are past their first year, many law students also have paid jobs at law firms or agencies, with time slots for work scheduled elaborately into the rest of their weekly calendar. And of course some law students have family responsibilities as well. At any rate, it can sometimes drive you crazy just trying to find a time to meet with them, and it may seem at times that they are being unreasonably rigid or hard to reach. But in most cases, the fault is not theirs, but lies in the structure of their situation.

I will be explaining to them that your organization also has limited time and that you probably have scheduling problems of your own, and I will urge them to work hard to adjust to your needs. I will also remind them to provide you with good information about how you can reach them, by phone, e-mail, etc., if you need to contact them about scheduling or anything else. So I hope you will not run into serious problems. But just having an awareness of the tightness of their usual schedules will also be a help.

2. Law students are not yet lawyers.

This may seem obvious, but it can be important. Law students are still in school. They have not yet taken all the courses they need, they have not yet taken the bar examination, they have not yet been licensed to practice in any state, and with a limited exception for some students who are enrolled in the Legal Clinic, they have not yet been admitted to practice before any court.

One important thing this means is that like any other non-lawyer, law students are prohibited by law from engaging in the “unauthorized practice of law.” For instance, they cannot on their own provide legal advice to an individual or group. Because of this rule, it is not uncommon for a law student to suddenly start explaining, maybe with a tinge of anxiety, “I cannot give you legal advice. This is not legal advice.” They are not doing that to be slippery or evasive, but because they are not legally allowed to give advice, and they have an obligation to make sure people understand that.

Sometimes my students work on projects where they are being supervised by a licensed attorney. In that case, the group involved may indeed receive legal advice during the life of the project, and some of it may be communicated by the student. However, in that case, the advice is really coming from the licensed attorney, and not from the student.

Although law students cannot provide legal advice to a group or individual, they are able to provide general legal information, and they can help conduct educational events about law and the legal system. Many of the projects that my students do fall into this category.

I say all of this only so that you can have a better picture of what a law student can and cannot do for your organization in the context of a field project in one of my courses. If your organization has a need for specific legal advice – either for itself or for its members, that is not the kind of thing a law student working alone can reliably or legally provide. However, I will be happy to talk with you about possible ways you might find a lawyer who can help. In some cases, we may be able to arrange for a law student to work with you on such questions under the supervision of a qualified attorney.

3. Law students live under the iron fist of the semester system

Law students live and must organize their lives according to a rigid semester rhythm that consists of 14 weeks of classes, followed by an examination period. Exams in law school are a really big deal, because grades in most courses are based mostly on a single final written examination, and a student’s overall grade point average can be a huge factor in his or her ability to get a job. This system means that most law students virtually drop out of any other activity once exams draw near, so they can focus all their energy on doing well in the exam. Therefore, you need to be prepared for your law student partner to turn suddenly into a pumpkin toward the end of the term.

Fall semesters at UT law school run from mid-August up through the end of November or early December, but really students tend to start disappearing at Thanksgiving. Spring semesters usually run from the second week in January through late April, but again, students start disappearing by

mid-April. Throughout the semester I try to keep reminding myself and the students of the overall time frame and to plan our activities accordingly. But it is never easy to accept the limitations of the semester.

In addition to the overall semester schedule, you should be aware that I tell my students there is a weekly time expectation. Normally, students in fieldwork courses will spend an average of three to eight hours per week on their community projects, depending on what else is going on in a given week, and the demands of the projects. Over the course of an entire semester, this means that projects can range from around 40 to 100 hours of law student time, but that includes time they may spend doing things like traveling to your site, writing up weekly time sheets that I require, and preparing a final report. I encourage students to develop a semester work plan and to manage their time effectively. But you can help too.

For instance, one step you can take is to figure out important dates and deadlines during the semester, and to space them out so they help the work to flow and to get finished by the end of the semester. In figuring all this out, it is important for you to take time to talk with your student partner so that you can clarify expectations and develop a time-line tailored to accommodate the semester and the activities of your group. Be aware that if you have an important event or deadline that falls after mid-November in the autumn, or after mid-April in the spring, you should not count on law student participation in that event unless you reach a special agreement.

On the other hand, special events earlier in the semester can be a great focusing mechanism. If you have the flexibility to do so, it can often work particularly well if you schedule a special event with members of your group or the public, set toward (but not absolutely at) the end of the semester. This event can then serve as “destination” and motivator for your student partner, helping to provide real deadlines and the energy boost needed to bring the project in on time.

Another thing you can do that will help the student with his or her time management is to develop a list of tasks that would be helpful for the project and that could serve as a kind of safety net in case other plans fall through. At least some of these back-up tasks should be ones that the law student can do on his or her own, without immediate supervision or participation by you or your group or its members. If you have this kind of safety net in place, then in cases where a planned meeting or event or deadline gets postponed or canceled, or in case your organization’s energy needs to be diverted to another project due to some unforeseen development, then the student can immediately fall back on the list you have developed, rather than having a precious week go by without any progress or learning related to the project having taken place.

4. Students will greatly benefit from a chance to learn about your issues up close

Law students come from all kinds of backgrounds and bring all kinds of experiences and insights with them, so it may be that you will find a student who already knows a lot about your kind of organization, your issues, and the people you work with. But in many cases, your issues and concerns will be something new for the student working with you. In that situation, you can make a big difference by making sure that the student has some opportunities to learn about your group and its work in a first-hand, vivid, educational way.

Helping them get this experience rather than simply sending them off on a solitary chore requires some extra thought (and perhaps more) from you as community partner. But giving students these opportunities should lead to a concrete pay-off for you as well, because a student who has had some direct experiences with your group, its issues, and its members is likely to do a better job for the organization.

From my side, I will try to help by telling my students that part of their assignment with their community partner is to listen and learn about the group's mission and its issues, and about the people it is trying to reach or serve. I usually ask students to report formally to me about this listening and learning. But the students will probably need help from you to make this work.

For instance, maybe you could arrange for them to attend a meeting, an action, or a workshop, and then debrief with someone afterwards. Maybe you could set up an opportunity for them to interview one of the elders or leaders in your organization, to hear their perspective on the issues. Maybe you have a relevant film or book to recommend. (For that matter, if you have print or audio-visual resources about your group or its core issues, you might want to share those resources directly with me before the semester starts. That way I can make them available to students who are trying to decide what project they want to work on.) In any case, I will be happy to consult with you if you like about what you might put together that would help law students get a feel for what motivates your work, who your members are, why anyone should care about this, and what kind of justice issues are behind your organization's current agenda.

5. Law students also need to know some mundane stuff about your organization

Less important than a student's really "getting it" about your mission and your issues, but still helpful to the student nonetheless, is some concrete idea about the nuts and bolts of your organization. Some law students have extensive experience with non-profits and community-based organizations, but many do not. They may not think to ask you about some information that could get them better ready to serve you well.

So it will be a help if you can share with them some basics, such as a copy of your mission statement, a description of how decisions get made in your organization, some idea of its budget and funding sources, etc. Since these are law students, it might be educational for them to see a copy of your incorporation and by-laws documents if you are incorporated, or your 501(c)(3) application to the IRS if you submitted one. Copies of old newsletters can tell a lot about an organization. Or

news clips. I am also trying to introduce students to the world of fund-raising for public-interest work, so excerpts from past grant proposals would be another interesting way for you to give them a window into your work.

I will be telling law students on my end that they should find out some basic information about your group, so you should anticipate some questions on these topics. But if you took the initiative to put together an information packet with some of these materials, it might be especially helpful.

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These words to the wise have now gone on a lot longer than I intended -- thank you for reading this far! I hope that a student of mine will be working with you, if not this next semester, then at some other point in the future, and I hope this background information helps you and the student make the most of your time together. In the meantime, I appreciate your willingness to consider working with someone from one of my classes, and I look forward to future collaborations.

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