

Incorporating Mindfulness Meditation into Student Programming

Vanderbilt University Law School

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After taking on the newly created position of Assistant Dean for Student Affairs in July of 2002, I sought to learn about positive resources that could help to prevent the possible deleterious effects of law school, which have become well-known and publicized through ongoing research. I hoped to find mechanisms by which these negative effects could be minimized, which were consistent with the rigor and academic challenge necessary to prepare one for a legal career. Making these available through programming can help to further empower students and enable them to be better-prepared to manage the challenges of law school and the legal profession. In addition, gaining these skills will also help students potentially avoid the problems of depression, substance abuse and overall dissatisfaction that are so prevalent in the legal profession, once they've begun their legal careers.

Toward that end, I sought to make mindfulness meditation available to our 1L students, since this simple method resulted in a statistically significant reduction in stress levels in empirical research that compared the stress experienced by medical students and health care practitioners who had learned the mindfulness-based stress reduction technique with those who did not use the technique. I thought this method could similarly provide our students with skills that would help in reducing stress and enhancing their self-awareness. (The latter benefit is obviously also important with regard to students' professional identity formation, which is another priority). It was hoped that the ease with which the technique can be taught and performed regularly, with minimal time commitment required, would increase the likelihood that our students, who often feel overwhelmed and have time management concerns, would potentially embrace and use such a resource.

For the past four years, two experienced practitioners have facilitated a group that we entitled "Supportive Practices" group, during which students were exposed to not only mindfulness-based stress reduction, but also other techniques having beneficial effects, such as qi gong and cognitive strategies. We advertise "Supportive Practices" as a non-credit offering for 1L students and ask students to sign up for the group during orientation. The group meets for one hour weekly during the first ten weeks of class of the fall semester. The intent of this group is to provide our students with skills that help in reducing stress, improving concentration, and enhancing self-awareness. While these methods are not accepted or embraced by every law student, for many students, it has proved to be an important skill that helped to reduce their stress and improve their concentration and overall sense of well-being.

The group is being modified slightly this year, such that it will meet during the spring semester and will be open to all students. I will be incorporating some articles and exercises from the area of Positive Psychology, which will be introduced to students, along with the weekly meditation practice and general discussion of relevant topics in the small group setting. During the fall semester, a number of programs introducing Mindfulness Meditation to students are being presented, which will hopefully provide a valuable context and generate interest among students so that even more will express an interest in being a part of our Supportive Practices group in the spring.

I have also incorporated some contemplative practices into the Professional Responsibility course I teach during the spring semester. I begin each class with a reading from "The Reflective Counselor" by F. Gregory Coffey and Maureen C. Kessler. I utilize Professor Larry Krieger's "Eulogies" exercise, as well as the exercise requiring contemplation of a raisin, in order to encourage students to be introspective and attend to their

inner lives and better recognize their sense of self. Because an important part of the course centers on professional identity formation and the type of lawyer a student wishes to be – and journaling helps people think thoughtfully about these important issues -- students are required to submit weekly journal reflections about various assigned topics (although I often provide a choice for students with regard to the subject of their reflections). Two of the assigned journal topics are their eulogies and a reflection on contemplating the raisin. Part of the course grade is also based on a final “reflection/exercise,” which is a paper exploring themes from the course and, more importantly, questions that lie at the heart of a student’s interests, morality, and individual experience in law school or in the legal profession. In essence, the paper is to be the student’s personal perspective of his or her role and identity as an ethical lawyer.

Vanderbilt University also has a Contemplative Pedagogy group, which involves professionals from many different disciplines and departments who meet on a regular basis to meditate together. We also share experiences, articles, resources, and ideas (as well as enthusiasm and encouragement) regarding how to incorporate contemplative practices in our teaching and interactions with students, and our lives. One result of this group effort was the creation of a one-credit seminar for Vanderbilt freshman students entitled “InnerSpace: Explorations of Meditation Practice for Self and Society.”

10/22/10