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Some Law Schools Take the Lead in Students' Well-Being, Report Finds

ANGELA MORRIS, The National Law Journal

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Many law schools across the country run programs to help stressed out or depressed students, some of whom struggle with alcohol or drug problems.

There's more work to do.

The National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being said in a [report](#) released earlier this week that law schools must change their cultures so that everyone—professors, administrators and students—takes responsibility for student well-being. The report, issued by a coalition of groups including the American Bar Association and the Association of Professional Responsibility Lawyers, stems from a groundbreaking [study](#) published last year showing that more than 40 percent of students felt they needed mental-health help and a quarter were at risk for problem drinking.

Some law schools are ahead of the pack, the report notes, and have implemented programs to help students with mental health problems and substance abuse.

Identifying early on when a student is struggling is key. St. Mary's University School of Law in San Antonio, for example, has worked to help professors notice when students are absent from class or when they are struggling, and to reach out to someone to get them the help they need, said Amy Hardberger, associate dean of St. Mary's Law. Tracking students' attendance in class is critical, the report concluded, to identify early on those students who made need help.

At American University College of Law and at Georgetown University Law Center, professors can use a confidential reporting system.

Also key: making students aware that resources are available. The report said that all students should know about the resources a school offers to help students through well-

being crises, and a well-being curriculum can highlight them. Northwestern University's Pritzker School of Law currently offers a well-being curriculum that includes well-being workshops, mindfulness and resilience courses and meditation sessions, said the report.

Touro College Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center has recognized the value of students helping spread the word of resources available. It has a program for students to volunteer, get training and refer other students in a mental health crisis.

At Yale Law School, students have formed a **Mental Health Alliance** to raise awareness of the problem and remove barriers for students seeking help.

Mental health and substance abuse information should be part of law schools' curricula, as well, and they can incorporate it into professional responsibility, legal ethics or professionalism courses, the report said.

"Talk about it as a part of their duty of competence and professional responsibility towards their clients and the tribunal and the profession," said Bree Buchanan, co-chairwoman of the task force that released the report. "The student may not experience these issues, but without a doubt over the course of their careers will encounter other lawyers who do. They need to know to recognize it and know who to call for assistance."

Additional programs about well-being and dealing with stress should be offered at student orientations and before final exams. The report said one example is the "Peak Performance Program" at Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles, which aims to help new students de-stress, focus and perform well. Schools also can offer ongoing lecture series to inform students about how well-being practices can enhance their performance in law school and as lawyers.

At orientation, the University of Georgia School of Law has always invited representatives from the university counseling center, but in fall 2016 opted for a **law school-centric presentation** from the Dave Nee Foundation.

Baylor University School of Law in Waco includes well-being education among other topics in its Professional Development Program, which requires law students to take mandatory **CLE-style programming** throughout their three years in school in order to graduate. Students hear similar information at orientation.

The report said that law schools should have onsite professional counselors who at least work part-time. If a school can't budget money for a counselor, it might ask for help from a lawyer assistance program.

Many schools already offer counseling, including The City University of New York School of Law, Georgetown University Law Center, North Carolina University School of Law and Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law.

The report said that alcohol should not be the center of social events because it can discourage students from seeking help or resources. Schools should minimize the alcohol provided and create policies to stop student organizations from using student funds to buy alcohol. Professors should not drink at law school social events, the report said.

Texas Tech University School of Law in Lubbock has become a leader in student support, introducing **numerous programs** designed to identify and assist law students struggling with mental health or substance abuse. Among other things, the school has curbed much of the drinking that went on at social events.

But the report also called for some fundamental shifts. Teaching practices in some classes must change, it said. Professors should get training about how their classroom practices affect student well-being. Problem areas are comparative grading, mandatory curves, lack of clear and timely feedback, and teaching practices that isolate and intimidate students.

“Harmful practices should not be defended solely on the ground that law school has always been this way,” the report said.

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