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Public Policy Research & Drafting: A Pro Bono and Law Library Collaboration

by Tara L. Casey and Suzanne B. Corriell

As the Carrico Center for Pro Bono Service at the University of Richmond School of Law continued to grow its programs, forays into the areas of public policy and advanced legal research grew as well. For a number of years, our law students volunteered with nonprofit organizations during the General Assembly session, learning firsthand how issues develop into policy, which sometimes then develops into law. This experience required our students to expand their legal research and writing skills beyond the traditional case law and brief writing methods. Furthermore, a growing number of students were interested in pursuing legislative or public policy careers, and were looking to take advantage of opportunities that would hone their skills in these areas and increase their postgraduate employment potential.

Because of the strong history of collaboration between the Carrico Center and the law school's library faculty through these programs, the idea was hatched to create a course that would provide students with an exposure to the legal work performed in the public policy field. Situated in Virginia's capital, the law school is well positioned to prepare students for careers in legislative and public policy. Indeed, many statewide policy-oriented organizations are based in Richmond, and Virginia houses national policy research institutes. The plan was for this course to serve as good preparation for those students whose interests lie outside of the litigation or transactional arenas—connecting students with and showcasing their work to nonprofit organizations and government agencies.

In the fall of 2012 we launched this course, titled "Public Policy Research and Drafting," as an elective upper-level

class that combined both advanced legal research and writing instruction with a community-based experience. This workshop-oriented course provides students with an opportunity to explore advanced legal research in the public policy field, develop their writing skills in the context of creating an issue paper, and engage in community relations with nonprofit organizations in greater Richmond. Furthermore, through the Richmond Promise the University expressed its determination "to engage as a meaningful part of the Richmond community, of the nation, and of the world." This course addresses this goal, as it provides a valuable resource to nonprofit organizations that are otherwise unable to dedicate the resources needed to engage in such in-depth policy research and review.

The course has expanded the law school curriculum by allowing students to focus on the process of research and writing while working for a real organization with a real research need, while exposing students to the legal work traditionally performed in the public policy field. This course serves as good preparation for those students whose interests lie outside of the litigation or transactional arenas.

In addition to regular class meetings that focus on public policy law, each student project addresses a specific social justice issue as requested by partner organizations. Students are grouped into teams to meet weekly throughout the semester to discuss their progress and work on their research projects. Students are engaged in developing advanced research skills, using both legal and social science related materials. In moving beyond the traditional sources of legal research, students have wider exposure to conducting informational inter-

views, interpreting statistics, and keeping current with news and reports. Students submit their research plan, outline, and memo to the class and to the partner organization so that feedback can be incorporated into their revisions. In the weekly class, students receive intensive instruction and feedback on their research and writing, while also learning how to provide critical feedback themselves. At the end of the course, students present their research memoranda to the organization.

This classroom-community experience provides students with the opportunity to sharpen their writing and analytical skills, expand further their research skills, work with partners on a real-time project, improve their communication skills, and engage in critical proofreading and editing. In addition, we have recruited several outside speakers to talk to the students, including Amy L. Woolard, senior policy attorney at Voices for Virginia's Children, and Margaret L. Sanner, Virginia senior attorney at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

The inaugural class engaged in high level issues of statewide and national importance: the issue of criminal justice debt and its effects upon persistent poverty and recidivism; domestic violence laws in the context of Second Amendment rights; how health outcomes are affected by poverty and housing choice; and a survey of behavior modification policies used in juvenile detention. One student in the fall 2013 class continued his predecessor's research into criminal justice debt and repayment plans, while other students researched the intersections between poverty and education as well as poverty

Research continued on page 55

Research continued from page 53

and health, the interaction between federal and state highway safety regulations, and grand larceny thresholds.

The course has been a success. Students have received enthusiastic reviews from their respective organizations, including invitations to present their findings and papers to larger meetings and audiences even after the semester had concluded. Students also had the opportunity to engage with their nonprofit organizations' broader collaborations. Several students have created long-lasting networking connections, resulting in summer fellowships as well as permanent employment.



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Communications continued from page 54

or (2) when a formal written policy is in place, subject to strict procedural requirements,²⁰ an individual member may participate remotely, when attendance is not possible due to an emergency personal matter, disability, or medical condition.²¹ If remote participation is authorized for an individual, a quorum must be physically assembled at a central location, and arrangements must be made for the voice of the remote participant to be heard by everyone at the central location.²²

Endnotes:

- 1 Va. Code § 42.1-76 et seq.
- 2 See Va. Code § 42.1-88
- 3 Va. Code § 42.1-76.1 (legal counsel or a public body's administrator must provide the copies)
- 4 Va. Code § 42.1-77.
- 5 Va. Code § 42.1-86.1(A)
- 6 See Va. Code § 42.1-82(B) and see <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/agencies/records/>
- 7 Va. Code § 42.1-85(B)
- 8 See General Schedule 33 (County and Municipal Governments), Information Technology (eff. March 19, 2009)

- 9 See Va. Code § 42.1-77, definition of "public record" (noting that, regardless of physical form or characteristic, recorded information is a public record if it is produced, collected, received or retained in pursuance of law or in connection with the transaction of public business. The medium upon which such information is recorded has no bearing on the determination).
- 10 See General Schedule GS-19 (County and Municipal Governments), Administrative Records (eff. 8/21/2014)
- 11 Va. Code § 42.1-88
- 12 See Va. Code § 42.1-86
- 13 Va. Code § 2.2-3700 et seq.
- 14 Va. Code § 2.2-3704(G)
- 15 See Va. Code § 2.2-3704(B)(3)
- 16 Va. Code § 2.2-3704(I)
- 17 Va. Code § 2.2-3708(A)
- 18 *Id.*
- 19 Va. Code § 2.2-3708(G)
- 20 Va. Code § 2.2-3708.1(B)
- 21 Va. Code § 2.2-3708.1
- 22 Va. Code § 2.2-3708.1(B)(2) and (B)(3)



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