

Plan to Establish Student Wellness Coordinator at UNC School of Law

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Abstract

The reports of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse at law school campuses have reached a critical point. Students at UNC School of Law are not immune from these issues. Our current student body face innumerable stressors throughout their time here, and many are currently struggling without knowing how or where to turn for help. By adding the position of Student Wellness Coordinator, a licensed in-house counselor at the law school, UNC School of Law would have the capacity to serve as a crucial resource for addressing and preventing mental health concerns, alcohol and substance abuse, and poor overall wellness. Top-tier law schools are calling for such a position to be started across the country, and many law schools have already established such a position. Creating the Student Wellness Coordinator position at UNC School of Law will help increase the success rate of current students, recruit future students, and lead to a healthier and even more successful alumni base.

Problem

The stress of law school causes impairment to the mental health of individual law students, and the law school student body as a whole.

- At the time they enter law school, law students have a psychological profile similar to that of the general public. After law school, 20-40% have a psychological dysfunction.
- Depression among law students is:
 - 8-9% prior to matriculation
 - 27% after one semester
 - 34% after 2 semesters, and
 - 40% after 3 years.
- Over one-third of law student respondents screened positive for moderate or severe anxiety (much higher than comparable populations).
- Poor mental health negatively affects law students' academic performance, bar passage, and job success.

Without the necessary resources, law students have turned to harmful and, in some cases illegal, self-medication.

- Law students appear to be drinking more now than they were twenty years ago. Nearly one-quarter of law student respondents reported binge-drinking two or more times in the prior two weeks and one-quarter of respondents screened positive on the CAGE assessment, which suggests further screening for alcoholism is appropriate. (CAGE is a widely used tool to screen for alcoholism. A positive response to two of the four CAGE questions indicates someone who should be evaluated more carefully for alcoholism.)
- Illegal use of street drugs and prescription drugs is fairly common among law students, with nearly one-third of respondents (32%) having used marijuana, cocaine, or prescription drugs without a prescription in the prior year.
- In the United States, “ten law-school-related deaths occurred between July 2014 and February 2015, including eight suicides (seven students and one law school professor), and two homicides (one law student and one parent of a law student) at the hand of a law student.”¹

Solution

The Student Wellness Coordinator would be an in-house counselor position created to address issues of mental health and drug/alcohol abuse at UNC School of Law. Law student respondents in a recent study reported that they were more likely to seek help from a health professional than a dean of students, with 81% saying they would be very likely or somewhat likely to seek help from a health professional for an alcohol or drug problem and 79% for a mental health concern. By contrast, only 14% said they would be very likely or somewhat likely to seek help from a dean of students for an alcohol or drug problem and 15% for a mental health concern.²

The Student Wellness Coordinator would be the health professional at UNC School of Law that students would seek when they are in need of assistance for any mental health, stress, coping, or wellness related concerns. Faculty would also benefit from having this resource. The ideal qualification for the position would be:

- Licensed Clinic Social Worker (LCSW), Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), Licensed Professional Counselor Supervisor (LCPS), or Licensed Clinical Psychologist
- Certified Substance Abuse Counselor, Licensed Clinical Addiction Specialist, or experience with addiction/substance abuse
- Experience working with students or young professionals
- Experience working in higher education and working with administration, faculty, and staff
- Experience with a law school community or law school setting, or comparable graduate level student population

The salary for a social worker at a college campus counseling center is between \$50,000-\$55,000 which, with benefits, will bring the amount necessary to fund the Student Wellness Coordinator position to approximately \$67,500 annually.

Potential Funding Sources

North Carolina Health and Human Services Grants

Potential funding amount: \$10,000 - \$70,000

The Department of Health and Human Services (DDHS) manages the delivery of health- and human-related services for all North Carolinians. The Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Abuse Services of DDHS was awarded an Access to Recovery grant by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to implement a voucher program for recovery support services for adults with substance use disorders. The Division is contracting with Recovery Communities of North Carolina (RCNC) for primary implementation of the grant. As an active and growing recovery community organization, RCNC is in an optimal role to work with other non-traditional providers of services and community organizations to advance this initiative.

Additionally, the Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant (SABG) allocates for funds that will provide prevention, early intervention, treatment, and recovery supports to individuals at risk for or with a substance use disorder. These funds, which typically amount to more than \$40 million per year, are integral to the development, maintenance, and expansion of services in North Carolina.

UNC School of Law would be an ideal candidate to qualify for either of these two grant opportunities.

Shared Position

Potential funding amount: \$33,750

The ability for this position to be shared with another professional graduate program will be very helpful in funding this position. This has worked successfully with the UNC Medical School and the Biomedical Science Graduate Student Program (see below). UNC School of Law currently has a shared relationship with the UNC School of Government for IT services, which might serve as a model for this position.

UNC School of Law Endowment Fund for Mental Health

Potential funding amount: \$3,000-\$70,000

The UNC Law Foundation, Inc., is organized exclusively for charitable objects and purposes that are for the sole benefit of the School of Law at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The foundation, aids, supports, and promotes teaching, research, and service at the School of Law. The foundation encourages the

establishment of endowment funds for purposes including, but not limited to, professorships, visiting professorships, fellowships, and scholarships at the School of Law. Setting up an endowment fund and fundraising for this position directly aligns with the mission of the UNC Law Foundation, Inc. Given the increased emphasis on mental health, this position could be an excellent cause to get increased donor participation.

NCBF Endowment Grant

Potential funding amount: \$1,000-\$20,000

The North Carolina Bar Foundation (NCBF) awards grants supporting worthwhile educational, public service, and pro bono projects throughout North Carolina. Awards are granted in conjunction with the following purposes and objectives of the NCBF: to study, improve, and facilitate the administration of justice; to build respect for and understanding of the law; to enhance the professional competence of lawyers; to support the delivery of legal services to eligible indigent communities; and to support legally related community service projects. This position would be an ideal candidate to qualify for this grant opportunity.

NC Lawyer Assistance Program

Potential funding amount: \$1,000-\$30,000

The North Carolina Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP) is a free and confidential service available to law students in North Carolina. They do not report to the school or the Board of Law Examiners. LAP can provide help with issues that many law students face, including alcohol or drug problems, depression, anxiety and stress, family issues (divorce/grief/loss), and other issues as needed. Having a LAP representative available is a mutually beneficial relationship that should interest this organization.

Student Activity Fee Committee

Potential funding amount: \$10,000

The Student Activity Fee Committee has approximately \$20,000 for the year, or \$10,000 each semester, to allocate to students and student groups. If this were cut in half, student activities would not be materially impacted. Because this service would go directly to the students, it would be an appropriate re-allocation of funds.

Student Bar Association

Potential funding amount: \$10,000

The Student Bar Association has a significant reserve from the funds collected by the Student Bar Association Student Fee. On a yearly basis, Barrister's Ball loses \$10,000 even though it brings in \$7,500. The SBA has the ability to mandate this event is cost neutral. Because this service would go directly to the students, it would be an appropriate re-allocation of funds.

Benefits to UNC School of Law

The Student Wellness Coordinator would aid UNC School of Law in meeting the needs of current students and increase their ability to be successful professionals.

- Mental health issues caused instances of safety and student retention in the past.
 - In 1995, UNC Law student Wendell Williamson killed two people by shooting them with a shotgun on Henderson Street. (He was later diagnosed with schizophrenia and found not guilty by reason of insanity.)³
 - UNC Law student Eric Bryant committed suicide in Spring 2010.⁴
 - UNC Law student Alex Finamore died in January 2011 after reaching out to student services.⁵
 - The student who finished at the top of the Class of 2018 our first semester dropped out due to mental illness, as proclaimed on social media.
- When asked about a mental health professional at the UNC School of Law, a sample of approximately 50 current students (several of whom are in the top 15% of their classes) responded:
 - Affirmed the need for this service
 - Emphatically confirmed that they would use the services
 - Found CAPS to be inconvenient and inadequate.
- Students who receive counseling and undergo necessary treatment are more likely to pass bar certification.
- Students who hide their addiction or mental illness are less likely to maintain their bar certification as attorneys and are less likely to succeed as attorneys.⁶

The Student Wellness Coordinator would aid UNC School of Law in attracting future students, and keep the school on pace with other top law schools.

- The 2016 ABA Mental Health Toolkit states that Law School Administration should “[p]rovide for a full-time law school counselor to address mental health concerns and issues. Having a counselor available at the law school may lead to de-stigmatizing the idea of seeking help, while bringing this resource closer to students may increase the likelihood that students will seek assistance.”⁷

- In December 2017, the student leaders from 13 of the nation's T-14 law schools have pledged to broaden mental health initiatives on their campuses and to fight the stigma of seeking treatment.⁸
- Other competing law schools currently offering In-House Counselors include: Washington University in St. Louis, Georgetown University, University of Washington Law School, Loyola Law School, City University of New York School of Law, South Texas College of Law, and North Carolina Central University School of Law.
- All of the above impact the success and notoriety of the UNC School of Law alumni network, which influences law school ranking, potential students' decisions to attend UNC School of Law, and alumni contributions to the School of Law.

Proof of Concept at UNC

UNC Medical School (~800 students) and the UNC Biomedical Science Graduate Student Program (~500 students) jointly hired a psychiatric social worker at the director level at \$70,000/year to provide individual counseling for students, support groups for students and their families, training for staff regarding student stress, and wellness programming.

Medical students face a comparably stressful schooling environment and similar licensing requirements after graduation that cause fear of reporting mental illness or addiction issues. The Medical School found that UNC CAPS is overloaded, exceeding record numbers of appointments per counselor each week, and only provides a small number of free sessions, often forcing students to see a different provider each time. The Medical School felt that more students than ever are entering graduate school with pre-existing mental health conditions and are leaving graduate school with mental health conditions that did not previously exist, which prompted their decision to hire an in-house counselor.

The student body has responded very positively to the service. In the Fall 2017 semester, the psychiatric social worker began taking appointments. By October, she was booked three weeks out. Due to high demand, the UNC Medical School and the Biomedical Science Graduate Student Program plan to hire a new psychiatric social worker so that they no longer have to share one. The schools created an arrangement with a UNC psychiatrist to be available one half-day each week for consultations on challenging cases, and the counselor refers to CAPS or other psychiatrists when fuller psychiatric care is needed. The UNC Medical School will be advertising the wellness services in future admissions materials.

Conclusion

We believe that the Student Wellness Coordinator will play a vital role in the current and future success of UNC School of Law. Every individual with whom we have spoken – both internally at UNC School of Law and at other graduate programs – has been enthusiastic about the need for a mental health professional available on site and the benefits in both the short and long term of such an individual. We hope you will join with us in making the Student Wellness Coordinator position a reality at UNC School of Law within the next 12 to 18 months.

Additional Resources:

- http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/students_at_top_law_schools_ask_for_more_mental_health_supports
- https://law.yale.edu/system/files/falling_through_the_cracks_120614.pdf
- http://www.ncbex.org/pdfviewer/?file=%2Fassets%2Fmedia_files%2FBar-Examiner%2Fissues%2F2015-December%2FBE-Dec2015-HelpingLawStudents.pdf
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/business/lawyers-addiction-mental-health.html>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/magazine/why-are-more-american-teenagers-than-ever-suffering-from-severe-anxiety.html>
- <http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/19/us/lawyer-suicides/>
- <http://www.vnews.com/news/13016059-95/professors-death-ruled-suicide>
- http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/vermont_law_student_and_his_mother_die_in_murder_suicide
- <http://www.gwhatchet.com/2015/03/16/second-year-law-students-death-ruled-a-suicide/>
- <http://www.theneworleansadvocate.com/news/11497215-123/tulane-law-school-students-faculty>
- <https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/almID/1202645430465/?slreturn=20180003171925>
- http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/speaking_up_helping_law_students_break_through_the_silence_of_depression/
- <http://www.daveneefoundation.org/history/>

¹ Jerome M. Organ, David B. Jaffe, and Katherine M. Bender, Ph.D., *Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help for Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns*, 116 JOURNAL OF LEGAL EDUCATION 116, (Autumn 2016).

² *Id.*

³ Jordan Nash, *An oral history of one of Chapel Hill's darkest days*, THE DAILY TARHEEL, Jan. 25, 2015 [<http://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2015/01/an-oral-history-of-one-of-chapel-hills-darkest-days>].

⁴ UNC, *family hope others learn from student's suicide*, WRAL.COM, Aug. 9, 2010, [<http://www.wrал.com/news/education/story/8108886/>].

⁵ Nicole Comparato, *Law Student Will Be Missed*, THE DAILY TARHEEL, Jan. 12, 2011 [http://www.dailytarheel.com:8080/article/2011/01/law_student_will_be_missed].

⁶ *Alcohol and Other Drug Problems*, NORTH CAROLINA LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM, [<http://www.nclap.org/Alcohol-or-Drug-Problems/>].

⁷ ABA Law Student Division, the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs (CoLAP), and the Dave Nee Foundation, *Substance Abuse & Mental Health Toolkit for Law School Students and Those Who Care About Them, at 30*, [<https://abaforlawstudents.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/mhw-handbk.authcheckdam.pdf>].

⁸ Angela Morris, *Students From Elite Law Schools Vow to Combat Mental Health Suffering on Campuses*, LAW.COM, Dec. 04, 2017, [<https://www.law.com/sites/almstaff/2017/12/01/students-from-elite-law-schools-vow-to-combat-mental-health-suffering-on-campuses/?slreturn=20180015123501>].