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GENERAL ARTICLES

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SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR GOOD PRACTICE IN LEGAL EDUCATION

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# Seven Principles for Good Practice in Legal Education

## History and Overview

Gerald F. Hess

The seven principles of good practice in legal education are modeled on seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education. The undergraduate principles were derived from decades of research on teaching and learning in college. This issue of the *Journal of Legal Education* applies the principles to legal education, explores their implications, and describes practical methods to implement them in the law school classroom. The principles assert that good practice in legal education

- encourages student-faculty contact
- encourages cooperation among students
- encourages active learning
- gives prompt feedback
- emphasizes time on task
- communicates high expectations
- respects diverse talents and ways of learning

### Development of Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

During the early 1980s, concern about the quality of instruction in colleges and universities gave rise to a series of events that culminated in the development of seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. In the mid-1980s the American Association of Higher Education published several reports and sponsored a series of conferences on the improvement of undergraduate education. Two of the AAHE board members, Zelda Gamson and Arthur Chickering, embarked on a project to develop a statement of principles to guide the quest for quality undergraduate education.<sup>1</sup>

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1. The development is chronicled in the first chapter of two books: Arthur W. Chickering & Zelda F. Gamson eds., *Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (San Francisco, 1991); Susan R. Hatfield, ed., *The Seven Principles in Action: Improving Undergraduate Education* (Bolton, Mass., 1995). For this brief introduction I have drawn heavily on those works.

To initiate that process, the Johnson Foundation provided support for a meeting of a task force of scholars who had contributed much of the research on college teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup> The task force set out to identify key principles that characterize educationally successful undergraduate institutions and the research that supports the principles. Because of studies showing that most people can hold in their minds between five and nine items at one time, Gamson and Chickering asked the members to limit the list of principles accordingly. The goal was to make the principles understandable, practical, and widely applicable.

The final version of the *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* was published as the lead article in the March 1987 issue of the *AAHE Bulletin*.<sup>3</sup> Over the next eighteen months, more than 150,000 copies of the Seven Principles were ordered from the Johnson Foundation. Subsequently, a group of educators developed a Faculty Inventory, Student Inventory, and Institutional Inventory—instruments to provide teachers, students, and administrators the means to assess how their courses and campuses reflect the seven principles.<sup>4</sup> Tens of thousands of copies of the inventories have been distributed during the last decade. Numerous conferences and faculty development programs have addressed the implementation of the seven principles in undergraduate classrooms. Books and journal articles review the research behind the seven principles and their practical application in college. Winona State University has established the Seven Principles Resource Center to distribute the seven principles and the inventories and to collect materials on their use and effectiveness. In short, the seven principles have set an agenda for the improvement of teaching and learning in college.

### Why Apply the Seven Principles to Legal Education?

The seven principles were developed in the context of undergraduate education. Why should legal educators apply the seven principles in the law school setting? For a simple, but powerful, reason: law teachers who understand and implement the seven principles and law schools that reflect the seven principles can significantly improve the quality of teaching and learning in legal education and the personal satisfaction of faculty and students as well.

The seven principles are student- and learning-centered. Much of the research that forms the basis for the principles is concerned with questions such as these: How do students learn concepts and skills? What motivates students to work hard in their courses? What relationships and experiences have the greatest impact on students? Based on the results of empirical

2. The task force consisted of Alexander Astin of UCLA, Howard Bowen of the Claremont Colleges, William Boyd of the Johnson Foundation, Carol Boyer of the Education Commission of the States, K. Patricia Cross of Harvard, Kenneth Elbe of the University of Utah, Russell Edgerton of AAHE, Jerry Graff of Hamline University, Henry Halsted of the Johnson Foundation, Joseph Katz of SUNY at Stony Brook, C. Robert Pace of UCLA, Marvin Peterson of the University of Michigan, and Richard Richardson Jr. of Arizona State University.
3. It is reprinted in Chickering & Gamson, *supra* note 1, at 63–69.
4. The inventories applicable to undergraduate education are reprinted in Hatfield, *supra* note 1, at 117–39.

research directed at those and similar questions, the seven principles set out basic precepts of effective learning. For example:

- Frequent student-faculty contact, both in and out of class, is the most important factor in student motivation.
- Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated.
- There are many roads to learning; students bring different talents and styles of learning to school.
- High expectations are important for everyone—for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves, and for the bright and motivated.

The seven principles offer faculty a conceptual and practical framework for improving the quality of their teaching. Consider the following:

- Students must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives.
- Students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive suggestions for improvement.
- By sharing their own ideas and responding to others' thoughts, students improve their thinking skills and deepen their understanding.
- Students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them.

An effective teaching and learning environment can increase personal satisfaction for students and teachers. The seven principles address a number of negative characteristics that contribute to student and faculty frustration in and out of the classroom: distant, impersonal connections between teachers and students; competitive and isolated relationships among students; passive teaching and learning methods; lack of ongoing feedback on teachers' and students' performance; and low expectations.

The seven principles can help teachers and students create an environment of mutual respect and fulfillment. For example, students who know a few teachers well can get through the tough times and strengthen their commitment to the educational endeavor. Likewise, students who have the opportunity to work cooperatively with one another in the classroom can increase both their depth of understanding and their involvement in their own education. Students are most likely to succeed in school if they engage in a variety of active learning methods, receive periodic feedback on their performance, are allowed to demonstrate their learning in ways that play to their strengths, and are held to high expectations. When students succeed under those circumstances, faculty share in that success because they helped create the conditions that allowed both students and teachers to reach their goals.

### **Adapting the Seven Principles to Legal Education**

Although the seven principles were developed in the mid-1980s and have enjoyed wide distribution in undergraduate departments at colleges and

universities during the past ten years, most law teachers remain unaware of the principles and inventories. To bring the seven principles to the attention of legal educators, the Institute for Law School Teaching sponsored a conference in the summer of 1998, titled *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Legal Education*. The seven authors of these essays developed, attended, and presented that conference. The participants explored four topics:

- the research basis for each of the principles
- the adaption of each principle to the environment of legal education
- barriers to implementing the principles in law school
- strategies to overcome those barriers

Participants identified a number of critical issues regarding the application of the seven principles in legal education, including:

- the need for more research on the relevance of the seven principles in legal education
- the benefits of wide distribution of the seven principles among law schools
- the value of tailoring the faculty, student, and institutional inventories so that law teachers, students, and administrators can assess how their courses and schools reflect the seven principles
- the essential role of law faculty and deans in supporting the implementation of the seven principles
- the identification of additional fundamental principles of good practice applicable to the unique culture and goals of legal education

That conference represented a beginning for legal educators' consideration of the seven principles.<sup>5</sup> Afterwards, the authors of the essays that follow developed faculty, student, and institutional inventories adapted for legal education. Only the faculty inventories are included here; for the others, see the website of the Institute for Law Teaching: <<http://law.gonzaga.edu/programs/ilst.htm>>.

This issue of the *Journal of Legal Education* can be part of an important step forward for legal education. It addresses in detail each of the four topics considered at the conference, and it begins to address the critical issues identified by conference participants.

In the articles that follow, a diverse group of authors adapt the seven principles to legal education. The seven of us have done traditional and innovative classroom teaching, developed and directed legal writing and academic support programs, taught in clinical settings, and served as law school administrators. One characteristic we share, however, is a commitment to outstanding teaching and meaningful learning in law school.

5. Since then, the seven principles have been the subject of the program of the Teaching Methods Section at the 1999 AALS annual meeting and a session at the 1999 AALS Workshop on Clinical Legal Education.