Leveraging skills and experience across disciplines is essential for global health professionals tackling complex barriers to reduce poverty and improve health outcomes. Research centers at universities are uniquely positioned to facilitate such interprofessional collaboration, and to educate current and future global health practitioners. For the past three years, the O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law at Georgetown University (the O’Neill Institute) has offered an interprofessional and collaborative global health law practicum course at Georgetown University Law Center that gives students the opportunity to work on real world global health law and policy projects with the institute’s external partners. Through course evaluations and discussions with program faculty and students, we have found that practicum-style courses help foster three fundamental elements of interprofessional collaboration in global health: (1) the ability to define professional roles and responsibilities in a project; (2) interprofessional communication skills; and (3) the ability to work in an interprofessional team. This paper will discuss the O’Neill Institute’s experience in developing interprofessional global health skills through its practicum courses.

Teaching Interprofessional Global Health in Legal Academia

The O’Neill Institute was established in 2007 to respond to the need for innovative solutions to the most pressing domestic and international health concerns. Housed at Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C., the institute is comprised of a multi-disciplinary network of faculty, fellows, staff, students, affiliates, and alumni with a diversity of experience and expertise in the fields of law and health. The O’Neill Institute also draws on the intellectual capital of the Georgetown School of Nursing and Health Studies, the Georgetown Medical Center, and many other constituents of Georgetown University. Several faculty members from these campuses teach in O’Neill Institute courses and programs and collaborate on institute projects.

The essential vision for the institute is the proposition that the law has been, and will remain, a fundamental tool for solving critical health problems in our global, national, and local communities. As a result of rapid globalization, there is a dire need for a coherent system of global health law and governance. In its project work and capacity building, the institute adopts the following definition of global health law proposed by O’Neill Institute Faculty Director Lawrence Gostin and Professor Allyn Taylor:

Global health law is a field that encompasses the legal norms, processes, and institutions needed to create the conditions for people throughout the world to attain the highest possible level of physical and mental health.¹

The global health law curriculum reflects this definition and is designed to give students a broad understanding of the multiple ways in which the law can be used by key decision-makers in the public, private, and civil society sectors as a positive tool to enable individuals and populations in the U.S. and throughout the world to lead healthier lives.

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The O'Neill Institute is currently organized around seven thematic areas: food and drug law; global health governance; health care; health and human rights; infectious diseases; non-communicable diseases; and trade and investment. The institute has developed a three-pronged approach to advance health through the practice of law: (1) scholarship; (2) research projects that translate and apply the research to create real world policy solutions; and (3) capacity building and teaching. In all three lines of work, the institute aims to analyze each challenge from multiple perspectives and multiple disciplines. Our interdisciplinary scholarship and research projects help inform our teaching and capacity building initiatives so that our curriculum reflects the cutting edge issues in global health law. Our primary program in our capacity building work is a Master of Laws (LL.M.) degree in Global Health Law offered through Georgetown University Law Center. We also offer a joint LL.M. degree in Global Health Law and International Institutions with the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. At this time, these programs are the only Global Health Law LL.M. programs in the world.

An interdisciplinary curriculum and innovative courses are available that teach interprofessional skills such as team building and the identification of interdisciplinary issues. For example, an Epidemiology for Lawyers course is offered as part of the Global Health Law LL.M. curriculum to teach law students the public health terminology and discourse necessary to communicate and work with health professionals to solve global health challenges. To ensure that law students not only speak the language of other professions, but know how to use it in practice, faculty at the institute developed an annual interprofessional practicum course.

For the past three years, the O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law at Georgetown University (the O'Neill Institute) has offered an interprofessional and collaborative global health law practicum course at Georgetown University Law Center that gives students the opportunity to work on real world global health law and policy projects with the institute’s external partners.

An Innovative Interprofessional Global Health Practicum Course Model

Practical legal education has become increasingly important in legal academia in the last 20 years and reinforced by the Carnegie Foundation report on legal education in 2007 that encouraged greater emphasis on teaching practical skills to improve the utility and quality of legal education. Practical legal skills are most commonly taught via law school clinical programs, but there are a number of models to teach law students practical legal skills, such as a practicum course. The O'Neill Institute practicum courses provide students with an opportunity to work on global health law and policy projects under the direction of an institute project director or faculty member. The semester-long, 4-credit course is open to all J.D. and LL.M students. Students work with external organizations on projects that require analysis of intersecting legal regimes (including trade law, public international law and human rights law) that relate to contemporary global health challenges. The practicum includes a weekly seminar in which students are taught the substantive frameworks (both legal and non-legal) necessary to conduct their project work. Students are also given time in class to discuss and reflect on their work experiences and time is devoted to developing practical advocacy skills to support students in their project work. In this manner, practicum courses serve as a bridge between the law school classroom and the legal profession.

The inaugural O'Neill Institute practicum, taught by institute faculty, was offered in fall 2011 and coincided with the United Nations High Level Summit on Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). The projects and seminar for this practicum thus focused on NCDs and the law, with special emphasis on tobacco control, obesity prevention, and access to pain medicines. The primary objective of the course was to examine the interaction between NCDs and international human rights law. In the weekly seminar, students learned the foundational principles of international human rights law, focusing on the right to health and how to use a human rights approach to advocate for tobacco control and obesity prevention policies. Students were given the opportunity to work on a range of projects with different non-governmental organizations. One group of students, for example, was tasked with a project for the Inter-American Heart Foundation that involved mapping global legal structures for salt regulation. Students conducted research on the dif-
different legal mechanisms for regulating salt in a select number of countries and developed strategies to advocate for stronger salt regulation globally. The deliverable was a final report that the Inter-American Heart Foundation now uses to support their advocacy work.

Another example of a practicum project involved working with Open Society Foundations (OSF) on advocacy for palliative care. The students were asked to create a practical toolkit setting out the details about the United Nations (UN) and UN monitoring mechanisms relevant for advancing access to pain medication from a human rights perspective. The toolkit provided guidance on (1) relevant avenues for civil society participation in the UN system; (2) how to analyze the prevailing legal and regulatory barriers to accessing pain medication; (3) how to use an international human rights framework to advocate for policy change and enhance access to palliative care and pain medication; and (4) some general arguments that could be used to advance access to palliative care from a human rights perspective.

Practicum courses, such as the O’Neill Institute practicum discussed above, provide students with the opportunity to learn a host of skills, but we have found that they are a particularly effective learning tool for developing interprofessional competencies in global health lawyers. In our experience teaching practicum courses, we have found that the students’ project work with external partners emphasizes three different interprofessional competency domains: (1) the ability to define specific professional roles and responsibilities; (2) communication; and (3) teamwork.

How Practicum Courses Develop Interprofessional Skills in Global Health Law

In 2011, the Interprofessional Education Collaborative, released a report of an expert panel on Core Competencies for Interprofessional Collaborative Practice for health professions. The report identified four interprofessional competency domains: (1) Values/Ethics for Interprofessional Practice; (2) Roles/Responsibilities; (3) Interprofessional Communications; and (4) Teams and Teamwork. Although the report focuses on the development of interprofessional competencies by health profession students, these competency domains are equally relevant to lawyers engaging in global health collaborative practice. Practicum courses, such as the O’Neill Institute practicum discussed above, provide students with the opportunity to learn a host of skills, but we have found that they are a particularly effective learning tool for developing interprofessional competencies in global health lawyers. In our experience teaching practicum courses, we have found that the students’ project work with external partners emphasizes three different interprofessional competency domains: (1) the ability to define specific professional roles and responsibilities; (2) communication; and (3) teamwork.

1. Professional Roles and Responsibilities

A vital competency for interprofessional collaboration when tackling global health problems is the need to define each profession’s roles and responsibilities. Contemporary global health challenges are complex and multi-faceted and require lawyers to be able to identify how they can best contribute their legal knowledge, skills, and analysis. They also demand that lawyers are able to recognize the limitations of their skills and knowledge. Practicum students are often confronted with this task early in their project work. Many of the “clients” in the practicum projects are not lawyers but rather, are policy makers, health professionals and advocates. Although the general framework for the project has been established with the help of the O’Neill Institute’s supervising instructor, students must conduct background research on the problem and further refine the scope of the project. With feedback from the external partner, students prepare a draft outline for the final deliverable. This provides them with the opportunity to propose innovative legal solutions that the client may not have previously considered. Because the process is interactive, it also sometimes requires students to identify areas of the project work that may be outside the scope of their legal expertise. For example, components of some projects may require expertise in epidemiology as students are asked to support legal or policy interventions with epidemiological data. Students learn how to clearly and professionally communicate the limita-
tions of their expertise to the client and propose alternative solutions for addressing that non-legal component of the project. As the O’Neill Institute regularly engages in interdisciplinary work, instructors are able to connect students with experts at the Georgetown Medical Center or School of Public Policy to assist them in their project work. In this manner, students learn how different professional roles and responsibilities complement each other in global health.

2. Communication

The ability to communicate clearly and with experts from different professions is a crucial skill that global health lawyers should master. It is well established that, because specialized jargon is a core feature of a professional culture, communication in interprofessional work can be acutely challenging. Legal jargon in particular often acts as a barrier for lawyers engaging in interprofessional collaboration in global health. Practicum projects give students a valuable opportunity to practice appropriate communication skills both orally and in their written work product. They are not only working with non-lawyers in conducting the research and writing, but often the project deliverable is a practical toolkit or guidance document that will be used by health care professionals or on-the-ground advocates who have not been legally trained. Law students are accustomed to writing legal academic papers and are often challenged when they are required to shift gears and translate their legal knowledge and analysis so that it is useful for non-lawyers. A good example of this is the OSF project in which students were asked to draft a toolkit on UN monitoring mechanisms for non-governmental organizations advocating for access to palliative care and pain relief. Students were required to draft the central arguments for access to palliative care and pain relief under international human rights law in a manner useful to non-lawyers. They also had to think critically about presentation of the project deliverable and how to structure the toolkit so it would be relevant and of utility to its target audience. This process was lengthy and took several iterations of drafts along with feedback from the client, but the end result was a practical toolkit carefully tailored for its purpose and to its target audience.

3. Teamwork

Underpinning all interprofessional skills in global health is the ability to work effectively in an interprofessional team. Global health law students in practicums learn to perform effectively on interprofessional teams in a manner that supports collaborative practice. Currently, the O’Neill Institute practicum is only offered to law students through Georgetown University Law Center. Although the students engage and collaborate with external partners who are often non-lawyers, the core team responsible for the project deliverable is comprised only of law students. As practicum courses and experiential learning continue to gain traction in law school curricula, educators should consider developing cross-listed practicum courses that can be taken by law students and students from other disciplines, such as medicine, public health or health systems administration. While such courses may involve some additional logistic or administrative challenges, they can provide future global health professionals with valuable, hands-on experience to build interprofessional teamwork skills.

Building interprofessional skills in global health is central to the education of all future global health professionals and, in the specific case of legal education, critical to advancing law as a tool to improve health outcomes. As this paper has proposed, practicum courses can provide students with the unique experience of applying their legal knowledge and skills in an interprofessional manner to address a global health challenge. As academic engagement in global health continues to rise across campuses internationally, educators should aim to incorporate innovative practicum courses with a focus on interprofessional collaboration. Particularly because global health law is only recently starting to be recognized as a distinct field, it will be crucial to train future global health lawyers with the interprofessional skillset necessary to make a meaningful impact and help to solve contemporary global health problems.

References

4. The Interprofessional Education Collaborative is sponsored by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine, the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, the American Dental Education Association, the Association of American Medical Colleges, and the Association of Schools of Public Health.
6. Id.