



FROM CLASSROOM TO COURTROOM: Engaging Today's Students to Become Tomorrow's Court Professionals

This article summarizes the findings of a field visitation program during the 2022-23 academic year in an urban district trial court. A diverse cohort of undergraduates from a national university participated in an onsite learning experience about the various roles, responsibilities, and career opportunities in the judicial branch.

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Background

Experiential learning involves the application of concepts and ideas. Activities that place students in working environments as a part of the course curriculum result in a learning experience that enhances students' comprehension of the material and, perhaps more importantly, fosters personal and social development (Larsen et al., 2017; Lei, 2010). Furthermore, scholars have found that students who engage in experiential learning in tandem with classroom activities had better retention of the material, were more highly motivated following the experience, and scored better academically in the course (Fedesco, Cavin, and Henares, 2020; Ryan and Deci, 2017). Field experiences, in particular, help shape and inform students' perspectives on early career choices (Kolb, 1984; Hutson, Cooper, and Talbert, 2011).

Courts can use experiential learning to build on the interests and curiosities of university students by helping them explore the depth and breadth of careers in the judiciary that they would not have otherwise discovered. These benefits are generally supported by the literature for both public- and private-sector organizations that partner in comparable initiatives (Cupps and Olmosk, 2008; Sanahuja Vélez and Ribes Giner, 2015; Rothman, 2007). Courts that are not already engaged in these collaborative programs fail to reap the advantages that these high-reward/low-risk opportunities can yield. For instance, prospective employers can use experiential learning to differentiate their recruitment from other agencies and industries competing to draw the best and brightest into their organizations. Managers can also use these occasions to bring awareness about required and preferred qualifications and develop students' skills to secure employment with the institution. Moreover, employers gain a forum to demonstrate the value of their contributions to the people and businesses located in the same community as the university.

This visitation program discussed here provided a district trial court a platform to enhance its recruitment pool by engaging with a diverse student cohort. For those court employees assigned to interact directly with students, it allows them to reflect on their experiences and the development of skills they cultivated during their careers. These collective experiences can increase employee job satisfaction by broadening the scope of their daily work and reinvigorating their commitment and dedication to the purposes and responsibilities of courts.

With these objectives and potential benefits in mind, and in accordance with Kolb's cycle of experiential learning, an onsite visitation program was designed for the purposes of integrating the following into the curriculum:

- 1. Knowledge:** the concepts, facts, and information acquired through formal learning and experience.
- 2. Activity:** the application of knowledge to a real-world setting.
- 3. Reflection:** the analysis and synthesis of knowledge and activity to create new knowledge.



The pilot program focused on developing and coordinating the field visitation program at a district trial court located in the same county of a national university where select courses were offered during the 2022-23 academic year. The court ombudsman office corresponded with faculty for several months to arrange a half-day program for students to observe various operations of the trial court.¹ Ultimately, the aim of the pilot was to determine the relative value of these unique experiences when students are afforded greater insight into the general working conditions and environment of professionals employed in the judiciary (and specifically the trial courts).

Methodology

Students enrolled in the Fundamentals of Courts, Criminal Courts, and Comparative Justice Systems courses during the fall 2022 and spring 2023 semesters were selected for the study. Students were surveyed before the program launch and then again following the half-day session. The visitation allowed students to observe actual court proceedings, including a sentencing and plea hearing, and engage with judges, executive-level managers, and other personnel, all of whom provided an overview of their roles and responsibilities. Time was allocated at the end of each segment for students to ask questions about the work and career trajectory of the professionals. The areas of work that were incorporated into the visitation program included the Trial Court Administrator's Office, Office of the Ombudsman, Criminal Division, Probation Division, and General Operations (including Jury Management).

Post-visitation survey data were collected along 11 variables and elicited through a series of Likert scale questions (five-degree differential) pertaining to students' experiences and observations. Demographic data were organized along the criteria of major, resident/commuter status, year of study, race, ethnicity, and gender. A content analysis was done on comments extracted from two open-ended questions in determining the strengths, areas in need of improvement, and perceived utility of the program. The results, conclusions, and recommendations were provided to the Center of Faculty Development—the university institute that granted the fellowship to conduct this study. The university sent a follow-up letter to the district court conveying appreciation for hosting the student cohort, with the recommendation that the partnership with the university be continued and expanded given the study's preliminary findings.

¹ In some jurisdictions, the role of an ombudsman is overseen by a communications director or officer.



Findings

Findings matched conclusions in the related literature demonstrating benefits for both the academic institution and court organization. More specifically, results showed high rates of satisfaction among participants. Students were more highly motivated to learn about career opportunities in the courts following the onsite learning experience and interaction with judges, probation officers, and court management professionals. Comparing pre- and post-survey results of the program indicated that undergraduates' knowledge base expanded and general interest in the court administration profession increased. The content analysis of comments was particularly noteworthy regarding the effects the visitation had on perceptions of the court profession.

Results were tabulated using the mean score for each of the 11 variables to assess students' feedback about their experiences and observations. The fall 2022 cohort totaled 13 students, whereas the spring 2023 cohort comprised 21 students. Students' evaluations of the program ranged between "agree" and "strongly agree" (see *Table 1*). With respect to the agenda, administration, judge, and courthouse environment, both cohorts likewise assessed the overall program favorably as either "very good" or "excellent." Both sets of the evaluation suggest that students found each segment of the program overwhelmingly positive.

Table 1 Mean Scores of Undergraduate Feedback of Court Visitation Program by Survey Measure and Semester

SURVEY MEASURE	FALL 2022 COHORT Mean Score	SPRING 2022 COHORT Mean Score
<i>Visitation Program Deliverable</i>		
Student would participate in another visitation	4.69	4.76
Course prepared student for visitation	4.54	4.81
Visitation enhanced student learning	4.69	4.71
Student would recommend professor organize visitations for future course offerings	4.85	4.95
Presentation materials provided by the court were informative	4.77	4.76
Duration of the visitation was satisfactory	4.69	4.76
Visitation provided a good proportion of theoretical and practical learning	4.92	4.71
<i>Visitation Program Deliverable</i>		
Agenda/Program Organization	4.46	4.48
Administration Presentation	4.38	4.62
Judge Presentation	5.00	4.57
Courthouse Environment	4.69	4.62

Notes:

Response scale for the visitation program deliverable denoted students' level of agreement as follows: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree.

Response scale for visitation program presentation denoted students' level of satisfaction as follows: 1 = Poor; 2 = Below Average; 3 = Average; 4 = Above Average; 5 = Excellent.

Most program participants were criminal justice majors (*see Table 2*). This is not surprising given that the selected classes are upper-level courses that are not generally taken as electives by nonmajors. Slightly more than 60 percent of the undergraduate group were campus residents. Sophomores comprised the largest faction of the class groupings, making up 38 percent of the cohort. More than 70 percent of the cohort identified as female. While most of the class identified as Caucasian, more than a third of the cohort identified themselves as Hispanic. African Americans comprised 15 percent of the group. There were no significant differences observed in the satisfaction rates of the deliverables or presentation of the program. All students regardless of status or semester enrolled rated the onsite visit favorably.

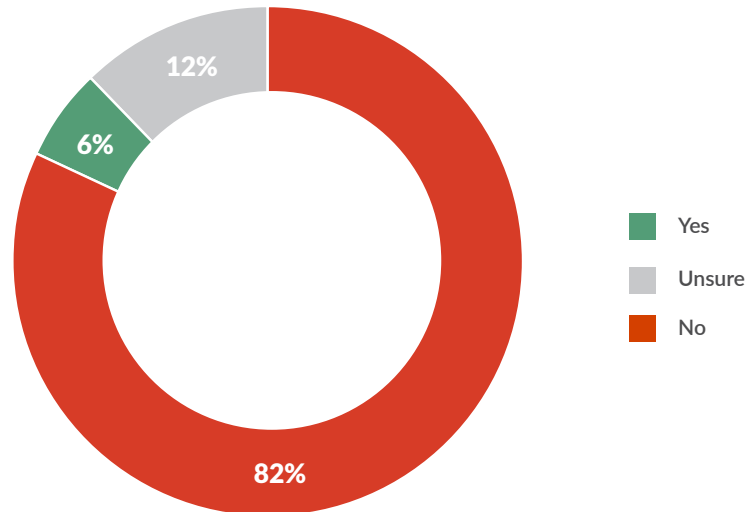
Table 2 Notable Demographics of Undergraduate Participants

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLE	PERCENTAGE OF COHORT
Criminal Justice Major	91
University Resident	62
Sophomore	38
Female	71
Hispanic	35
<i>Race</i>	
Caucasian	76
African American	15
Asian	6
Other	3

Students were asked to respond to this statement before the field visit: I have an interest in pursuing a career in the court administration field. All but two of the undergraduates were interested in pursuing a career in law enforcement, law (as a practicing attorney), or unrelated fields (nonmajors who were taking the course as an elective) or were uncertain. It should also be noted that the instructor made clear to those seeking work in policing that probation could be a viable option.² The data demonstrated that more than 80 percent of the cohort at the start of the semester had no apparent interest in exploring court administration as a profession (*see Figure 1*).

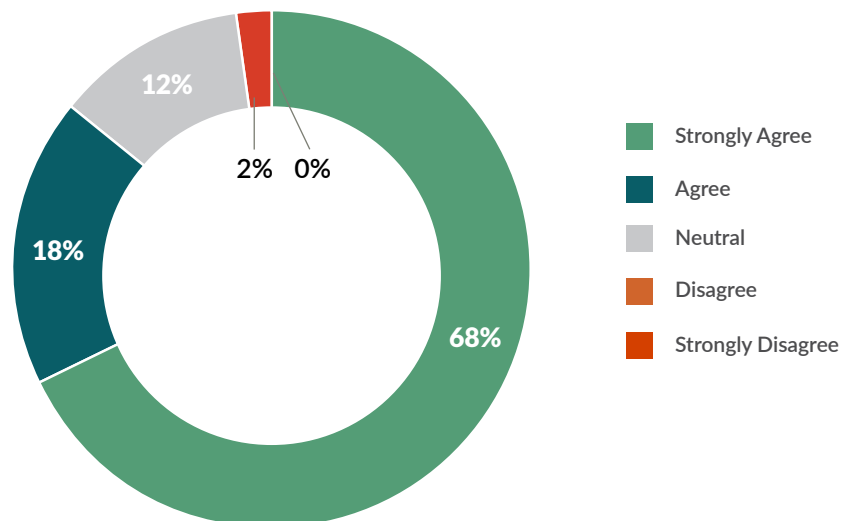
² In the state where the field visit was conducted, probation fell under the auspices of the judiciary as a division of the courts.

Figure 1 Percentage of Student Cohort with an Interest in Pursuing a Career in Court Administration Before Onsite Visit



Following the onsite visit with judges and court professionals, the undergraduates expressed their level of agreement with this statement: *This course increased my interest in the court administration field as a possible career choice.* Eighty-six percent expressed a newfound interest in at least exploring and discussing the job opportunities available in the judiciary. Only 2 percent appeared determined to pursue an entirely different line of work outside the judicial branch (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Percentage of Student Cohort's Level of Agreement with an Interest in Pursuing a Career in Court Administration following the Onsite Visit



Undergraduates were asked to respond to the following open-ended questions from which a content analysis was conducted:

1. What specific aspects (if any) did you find positive about the onsite visitation program?
2. In what ways (if any) do you believe the onsite visitation program can be improved?

More precisely, the students’ aggregate feedback was reviewed to determine the existence and frequency of factors that elevated their onsite experience, as well as considerations that could have enriched it further. Students were most notably absorbed by the live court sessions, the professionalism of the presenters, and the breadth of information about careers in the judiciary. Suggested improvements were grouped into providing transportation to and from the courthouse and expanding the program to a full day to deepen their exposure to the processes and professionals of the courts (see Table 3). Incidentally, this latter recommendation could be viewed as a positive remark given that many students sought to build on the experiences afforded during the visit.

Table 3 Emergent Themes to Research Questions and Sample Responses

THEME	SAMPLE RESPONSES
<i>Positive Aspects of Visitation Program</i>	
Viewing live court hearings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to see the court process in practice was really good. Seeing the judge sentence a defendant was a unique experience. Viewing a court proceeding so that I could connect it to our class discussion was very informative.
Disposition of visitation speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with administrators because it felt personal. It was great to see the diversity of managers and judges. Everybody was incredibly enthusiastic and really loved what they do. The love for their job really resonated with me. Made me feel like I could belong. I enjoyed getting to hear from the administrators who had a similar background to me and how they make a difference in the community.
Career presentation information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I liked hearing from different sectors of the courts. I gained a lot of new information and insight I was not previously aware of—I am interested in a whole new set of careers now. I enjoyed the internship opportunities presented and talking to the different people from various areas of the court.
<i>Suggested Improvements for Visitation Program</i>	
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It would be beneficial to provide transportation from campus to the courthouse. The organization of getting to the court—maybe a bus for transportation so the whole class could travel together.
Lengthen visitation time frame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A longer visitation would give more depth (including more divisions, greater detail on the inner workings of the different courts, viewing more court proceedings, etc.). Make it a full day and add a portion for networking with professionals. I would have liked to have spent more time talking with [the probation supervisor].

Apart from field visits, there are several methods that allow students to apply what they learn in the classroom to work environments, including internships, cooperative education, course fieldwork, faculty-led research projects, volunteer engagements, and employer-university led partnerships, conferences, guest speaker series, and networking events.

The preliminary results of this pilot program suggest that courts should consider exploring these collaborations with post-secondary institutions. Overall, this specific visitation provided students with a clearer understanding about select concepts of court administration, a broader view of the trial court system and the community it serves, and an opportunity to build and foster network contacts for future internships and job opportunities in the courts. The judiciary, likewise, appeared to benefit from the program because it gained a diverse candidate pool of students from which to recruit prospective interns and employees, who were evidently more enthusiastic about working for the courts following their visit.

This appeared particularly noteworthy for minority students who engaged with court professionals with similar ethnic and racial backgrounds. The professionalism and positive impression espoused by a probation supervisor (a Hispanic female), criminal division judge (an African American male), and jury management supervisor (an African American female) were remarkable and noted in students' comments.

Many students were observed by the instructor approaching these professionals following their respective presentations to inquire further about their experiences. The comfort level was made possible by the administrators and judge, who offered their advice and support and were generous with their time in responding to the impromptu questions of the group that gathered around them. These observations are indicative of the benefits of meeting and speaking with historically underrepresented persons who are professionals in the court workplace. As evidenced by the subsequent classroom discussions and some of the salient points made by students, the visitation showed them firsthand that the court was inclusive, served as an advocate for disenfranchised groups, removed real and perceived barriers, demonstrated a commitment to a diverse workforce, and amplified the sense of community that the court administrators were proud to serve. It also provided institutional spokespersons with a unique opportunity to discuss their work experiences while conveying their commitment and passion about the purposes and responsibilities of the courts—discourses that appeared to energize both the students and professionals.

Conclusions

Findings corresponded to the literature in showing that the benefits derived from the visitation are inextricably linked to the design of the initiative. Thus, the role of the instructor and court liaison in developing these kinds of learning experiences cannot be understated because it directly affects the extent to which objectives for the program are achieved (Menkshi and Braholli, 2020). Recommendations were segmented along suggestions that were research, action, and project oriented. One of the key proposals included strengthening the pilot program experience with other opportunities to engage professionals for the purposes of internships, guest-speaker engagements, or undergraduate research projects. Because the visitations provided a venue that allowed students to interact intellectually and socially with judges and court administration professionals, it could be used as a touchstone to further enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and other collaborations such as hosting practitioners for university-sponsored forums, conferences, and roundtable discussions. More broadly, questions remain: How can the university and court work together to best involve stakeholders in the development and delivery of onsite visitations? To what extent, given time and resource constraints, can visitations be individualized to best meet students' interests even if they are not fully aware of the potential possibilities? Should students be given a modicum of control over the areas toured and professionals they interact with while visiting the court?

The program appeared to improve undergraduates' ability to think more critically about the concepts discussed in the classroom, particularly as it related to various court events and the internal and external stakeholders who play important roles in those processes.

Perhaps most critically, the visitation widened the students' perspectives of court administration because it involves an experience that cannot be replicated in the classroom. Being onsite, however briefly, enabled them to empirically study the many areas of the court, including case management, probation, finance, operations, human resources, and information technology.

This exposure was at least partly responsible for the change in interest that most of the group had when asked about considering a career in the courts following the visit. Expanding the general scope and scale of the pilot was central to the proposed recommendations, principally because the results showed remarkable promise in helping to shape cognitive and affective learning outcomes. In this way, it shifts students' understanding of and appreciation for the work of the courts, which can ultimately inspire them to become its next generation of leaders.

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