

Exploration on the Path of Collaborative between Legal Education and Social Work

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Abstract

As two indispensable dimensions in the social governance system, legal education and social work have a profound internal connection in safeguarding fairness and justice and resolving social contradictions. Legal education constructs social order based on legal rules, while social work repairs social relations with humanistic care at its core. The collaborative development of the two is an inevitable requirement for addressing complex social issues. Currently, legal education and social work in China are confronted with problems such as obvious professional barriers and weak practical connection, which restrict the cultivation of interdisciplinary talents and the improvement of social governance efficiency. Starting from the value congruence, this paper analyzes the theoretical basis and practical necessity of their collaboration, examines the existing predicaments with practical cases, and finally puts forward collaborative paths from three aspects: the reconstruction of educational system, the innovation of practical mechanism, and the optimization of institutional environment, so as to provide ideas for promoting the reform of legal education and the professional development of social work.

Keywords

legal education; social work; collaborative development; social governance; talent cultivation

Introduction

As China's social governance enters a stage of refinement, knowledge systems rooted in a single discipline can no longer meet the challenges posed by complex social issues. Legal education, centered on legal rules, is committed to building a rigid social order; social work, focused on humanistic care, specializes in repairing flexible social relations. Though seemingly belonging to different fields, they naturally form value alignment and functional complementarity in practices of safeguarding fairness and justice and resolving social conflicts.

Currently, legal education and social work in China still face problems such as

prominent professional barriers and weak practical connection, leading to a dilemma where legal talents "understand rules but not society" and social workers "have compassion but lack legal basis." This has restricted the improvement of social governance efficiency. Against this backdrop, exploring the path of collaborative development between legal education and social work is not only necessary for promoting educational reform and cultivating interdisciplinary talents, but also an inevitable choice to respond to the needs of modernizing social governance. Starting from the theoretical logic of their collaboration, this paper analyzes existing problems based on practical status quo and finally proposes a systematic collaborative path, aiming to provide ideas for building a "law + society" interdisciplinary governance system.

1. The Value Foundation for the Collaboration between Legal Education and Social Work

1.1. Congruence in Value Goals

Fairness and justice are the core values shared by both legal education and social work. Legal education imparts legal knowledge and fosters a legal mindset, guiding learners to safeguard social fairness through the law, with its ultimate goal of establishing a "just order under rules." Social work, rooted in the philosophy of "helping people to help themselves," addresses the predicaments of vulnerable groups and coordinates social relations through professional methods, essentially practicing "justice in specific contexts." This congruence is particularly evident in the protection of minors' rights: legal education emphasizes building institutional safeguards through laws such as the Law on the Protection of Minors, while social work ensures the practical realization of legally endowed rights through services like psychological counseling and family support. Together, they safeguard the rights of minors in their growth.

1.2. Complementarity in Functional Implementation

The effectiveness of legal enforcement depends not only on the rigor of legal provisions but also on their adaptability to social reality. The "legal logic" cultivated by legal education excels at defining rights and obligations at a normative level, yet in complex social situations, it often requires the "practical wisdom" of social work as a supplement. For example, in community dispute mediation, legal provisions clarify the allocation of responsibilities, while social work's casework skills can defuse antagonisms and repair neighborhood relations. In community correction, laws set behavioral boundaries for correction subjects, and social work's group work methods help them rebuild social connections and enhance their ability to integrate into society. Legal education provides the "institutional framework," and social work offers the "implementation path," their complementarity forming a complete chain of social governance.

1.3. Commonality in Theoretical Foundations

Human rights theory and social systems theory provide a shared theoretical basis for their collaboration. Human rights theory requires legal education to focus on the law's role in protecting human rights and social work to concentrate on realizing the rights of vulnerable groups, jointly advancing the cause of human rights from the dual perspectives of "institutional guarantee" and "practical implementation." Social systems theory regards the legal system and social service system as subsystems of the broader social system, emphasizing that the stable operation of the entire social system can only be achieved through positive interaction between these subsystems. Just as resolving family disputes requires both guidance from marriage law and intervention from family social work, their collaboration ensures "cases are concluded, matters are settled, and relationships are harmonized."

2. Current Situation and Dilemmas of the Collaboration between Legal Education and Social Work

2.1. Partial Explorations in Collaborative Practice

In the field of education, some universities have started to experiment with interdisciplinary integration. For example, China University of Political Science and Law has offered an elective course entitled "Legal Social Work" in its postgraduate law program, inviting experts from social work institutions to participate in teaching. The Law School of East China University of Science and Technology, in collaboration with the School of Social and Public Administration, has organized students to jointly carry out the "Community Legal Assistance Project," integrating legal knowledge and social work skills in practice.

In practical fields, cooperation between judicial organs and social work institutions has gradually increased. The Haidian District People's Court in Beijing has set up a "Social Work Studio" in family trials, where professional social workers provide services such as psychological assessment and family relationship counseling for the parties involved. In 2023, among the divorce cases successfully mediated through this model, the compliance rate of the parties regarding child custody and property division reached 89%, which was significantly higher than that of the traditional mediation model. A district judicial bureau in Shanghai has implemented a "lawyer + social worker" dual-track system in community correction: lawyers are responsible for legal guidance, while social workers take charge of psychological counseling and social integration support, reducing the recidivism rate of correction subjects by 17% compared with the previous year.

2.2. Main Existing Dilemmas

The curriculum system of law majors still focuses on departmental law theories, with social work-related content mostly existing as "peripheral knowledge" and lacking organic integration with core courses. For instance, when criminal law

courses explain juvenile delinquency, they rarely involve the family environment, psychological factors, and other contents that social work pays attention to. Although social work majors offer basic law courses, they mostly stay at the level of memorizing legal provisions and fail to cultivate the ability to use legal tools to solve practical problems. This fragmentation makes it difficult for students to form a "law-society" interdisciplinary thinking.

The cooperation between legal institutions and social work institutions is mostly "project-based" or "temporary," lacking long-term mechanisms. After the "migrant workers' rights protection project" jointly carried out by a provincial legal aid center and a social work institution ended, the follow-up services such as vocational skills training and psychological counseling for the aided persons were interrupted due to the lack of a docking mechanism. Some courts have introduced social workers to participate in mediation, but social workers' insufficient understanding of litigation procedures and evidence rules often makes their proposed schemes unable to be implemented because they do not meet legal requirements, forming a collaborative dilemma of "each doing their own thing."

The evaluation system of legal education still takes exam scores and academic papers as the core, lacking assessment of students' social service ability and cross-field communication ability. Although the professional evaluation of social work emphasizes practical ability, it has low requirements for legal knowledge, which leads to practitioners being prone to "compliance risks" when dealing with legal-related issues. The deviation of evaluation orientation directly restricts the growth motivation of interdisciplinary talents.

3. Exploration of Paths for the Collaboration between Legal Education and Social Work

3.1. Integration and Reconstruction of the Education System

Break down professional barriers to build an integrated "law + social work" curriculum module. Law majors should add compulsory courses such as Introduction to Social Work, Case Work Methods, and Social Survey and Analysis. Core courses like civil law and procedural law should embed chapters on "social perspectives in legal practice," such as "Psychological Intervention for Children in Divorce Cases" and "Repair of Labor-Management Relations in Labor Disputes." Social work majors need to strengthen courses like Legal Practice and Law on the Protection of Vulnerable Groups' Rights to cultivate awareness of "serving in accordance with the law." For example, Southwest University of Political Science and Law offers an interdisciplinary course Social Policy and Law Implementation in its postgraduate law program. Through case discussions, students are guided to analyze issues from both legal and social work perspectives, significantly enhancing their ability to design comprehensive solutions.

Establish a "dual-qualification" faculty training mechanism: Support law teachers to

participate in social work practice training, encourage them to take temporary positions in social work institutions, and obtain social worker qualifications; Organize social work teachers to attend legal practice training and assist in case handling at courts and law firms. Additionally, invite judges, lawyers, and senior social workers as part-time mentors. Through co-teaching and joint case analysis, they transform practical experience into teaching resources, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Jointly build "law-social work" practice bases and design immersive training programs. For instance, organize students to participate in handling real family cases: In the early stage, law teachers guide them to sort out legal relations and clarify rights and obligations; In the middle stage, social work teachers lead family interviews to assess psychological needs and the possibility of relationship repair; In the later stage, they jointly develop comprehensive solutions combining legal plans and social work services. Such scenario-based training helps students intuitively understand the value of collaboration and improve their ability to solve complex problems.

3.2. Innovative Linkage of Practical Mechanisms

Set up "law-social work joint service stations" in streets and communities, integrating professionals such as lawyers, judges, and social workers to form a "one-stop" service chain. When residents face legal issues, lawyers provide rights protection guidance and document drafting, while social workers simultaneously conduct needs assessments and resource linkage, achieving seamless connection between "legal relief" and "social support." For example, a community service station in Guangzhou successfully resolved 43 neighborhood disputes in 2023 through this model, with 38 cases reaching long-term reconciliation agreements and a conflict recurrence rate of less than 5%.

Formulate Guidelines for Law-Social Work Collaboration to clarify division of responsibilities and connection mechanisms in different scenarios. In domestic violence cases, social workers are responsible for pre-risk assessment and temporary placement of victims, lawyers assist in applying for personal safety protection orders, and courts make judgments with reference to social workers' social investigation reports; In juvenile crime cases, social workers conduct social surveys and psychological correction, while prosecutors propose sentencing suggestions based on the survey results.

3.3. Optimizing the Institutional Environment

Education authorities should include interdisciplinary curriculum design and dual-qualification faculty development in university evaluation indicators to promote legal education reform; Judicial administrative departments and civil affairs departments should jointly issue documents, clarify collaboration norms between legal

institutions and social work institutions, and incorporate collaboration effectiveness into institutional assessments; Financial departments should increase funding for "law-social work" integration projects to encourage universities, judicial organs, and social work institutions to carry out cooperative research and practice.

Reform the evaluation system for legal education by including social service practice and cross-field collaboration capabilities in student assessments; Improve professional evaluation standards for social work by adding assessments of legal knowledge and compliance operations, making "legal literacy" one of the core competencies of social workers. Adjusting evaluation orientations will guide talents toward "interdisciplinary" development.

4. Conclusion

The collaborative development of legal education and social work is an inevitable requirement for the modernization of social governance and a key path to cultivating interdisciplinary talents who meet the needs of the times. Their collaboration is not a simple superposition of knowledge, but a deep integration rooted in value alignment—infusing legal practice with more compassion and social services with greater standardization. Despite the current challenges such as fragmented education and disconnected practice, professional barriers can be gradually broken down through the reconstruction of educational systems, innovation of practical mechanisms, and optimization of institutional environments, thereby forming a collaborative ecosystem characterized by "mutual enhancement in teaching, complementarity in practice, and institutional safeguards."

In the future, as collaborative mechanisms continue to improve, legal education and social work will join forces to play a more powerful role in safeguarding social fairness and justice and resolving complex social contradictions, providing solid support for advancing the modernization of China's national governance system and governance capacity.

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