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Recommended Citation

McBride, Paula E. (2014). "A Phenomenological Case Study of Preparedness for Public Interest Lawyers," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/roundtables/19>

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A Phenomenological Case Study of Preparedness for Public Interest Lawyers

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Keywords: legal education, public interest law, preparedness, social action

Abstract: The literature focusing on reform in legal education has failed to define what “preparedness” for a public interest lawyer means. In order to examine what conditions make a public interest lawyer graduate practice-ready, we must investigate the phenomenon which constitutes preparedness for public interest law.

The historical tradition and culture of legal education may no longer be applicable to the current social realities law graduates will encounter in any type of legal practice as we face “the nation’s and world’s unprecedented challenges in an ever-more complex global market” (ABA, 2012, para. 3). A call for reform has been issued from employers, professional law organizations, legal journals, and alumni who argue law school is no longer adequately preparing law students for lawyering practice of any type in today’s society (ABA, 2012; Carnegie Foundation, 2007; Christensen, 2007; 2008; Colby & Sullivan, 2008; LSSSE, 2010; NALP, 2010; 2011). The literature has failed to define what “preparedness” for a law student within each legal field actually entails or looks like. Without a clear definition or understanding of preparedness, law schools will be challenged to answer this call.

I propose a study which focuses on exploring the phenomena of preparedness for a public interest lawyer through four levels: the individual student in the process of becoming prepared; the recently prepared graduates practicing public interest law; the faculty who prepare these lawyers, and the larger organizational picture of public interest law firms and organizations. The theories being used to underpin this exploration are critical social theory, Dewey’s theory of education, and social action. Professional schools, such as law, have the capacity to cultivate social consciousness in students. Professionals working to serve the public good may not only persist as socially conscious citizens but actively continue to increase their knowledge and skills through lifelong learning opportunities (Colby & Sullivan, 2008).

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