Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics (2026), **54**, 1, 107–110
doi:10.1017/jme.2025.10215

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Columns: Teaching Health Law

Using Tiny Research Assignments to Support Active Learning

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Abstract

This article argues that weekly "tiny research assignments" in introductory health law courses promote active learning and deepen student engagement. These focused exercises also build foundational research and communication skills by replacing passive lecture with concise, student-driven investigation tied to each week's topic.

Keywords: Pedagogy; legal education; active learning; research assignments; student engagement

About This Column

This column is devoted to the teaching of health law, policy, and ethics, providing a platform for the sharing of innovative approaches and diverse perspectives on effective teaching in a rapidly evolving and complex health and legal landscape. Teaching Health Law is edited by Brietta R. Clark, JD, Fritz B. Burns Dean of Loyola Law School, Loyola Marymount University. She can be reached at brietta.clark@lls.edu.

The experience of teaching a semester-long survey course in health law can feel daunting. Whether the course is a school's only offering in health law or a prerequisite for a robust health law curriculum, the scope of required coverage is extraordinarily broad — ranging from health care financing to fraud and abuse law, malpractice law, drug regulation, and beyond. As a result, faculty may feel pressure to deliver as much substantive content as possible so that students complete the course with a solid foundation in the field. But research consistently shows that students retain more when they actively engage with the material rather than when they are merely passive recipients of information conveyed through lecture and readings.[1] And while small group exercises can be effective in helping students apply the law to new fact patterns, they aren't well suited for every pedagogical purpose.

After many years of teaching introductory health law courses, I've developed a strategy that helps bridge this gap: what I call "tiny research assignments." Each week, I assign students a relatively simple research exercise, intended to take no more than an hour, that connects directly to the week's topic. Students submit their findings in a short-answer question to the weekly quiz, and their research then lays the groundwork for in-class learning and discussion. So, for example, rather than my offering a dry lecture on Illinois' requirements for causation in informed consent actions, our class session will involve one or more students describing how they researched this issue and explaining the jurisdictional rule to their classmates. Or, when exploring current legal developments in reproductive health care, students get exposed to the breadth of the regulatory landscape by researching recent federal or state bills on their own, and then hearing other classmates describe their findings.

The benefits have been significant. Most importantly, these assignments significantly increase students' engagement with the course material. They become investigators rather than passive listeners, which deepens their understanding and sparks curiosity — especially when the assignment offers some flexibility in choosing a topic based on their own interests. Because each research exercise is narrowly tailored, it fosters active learning without imposing an excessive workload. Finally, this approach also helps students develop key lawyering skills: statutory, regulatory, and case law research; concise written communication; and the ability to synthesize and present complex concepts verbally.

Categories of Research Assignments

Broadly speaking, these "tiny research assignments" fall into three categories: (1) those that invite students to learn about the real-world implications of health law and policy on individuals and communities; (2) traditional research exercises that develop students' skills in finding and interpreting jurisdiction-specific legal rules; and (3) assignments that prompt students to investigate recent legal developments relating to current events. Below, I offer

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Cite this article: N. Sawicki. "Using Tiny Research Assignments to Support Active Learning," *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, **54**, 1 (2026): 107–110. https://doi.org/10.1017/jme.2025.10215

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https://doi.org/10.1017/jme.2025.10215 Published online by Cambridge University Press

examples of each type of assignment, and how I've found it benefits students. Full descriptions are provided in Appendix 1.

Real-World Implications of Health Law and Policy

Many students come to an introductory health law class with a limited understanding of the US health care system. Most are young, many are still on their parents' health insurance plans, and relatively few have had substantial experience navigating complex health challenges. This is the ideal foundation for our first tiny research assignment, "Understanding Your Insurance."

The first week of class, I ask students to review the information they can find online about either their own health insurance coverage or Loyola University's student health insurance plan,[2] with a focus on understanding cost-sharing responsibilities, provider networks, and appeals processes. In the weekly quiz question, I prompt them to reflect on this information-gathering process by sharing one finding that gave them a positive perspective on the plan, and one finding that surprised them or caused them concern. Student responses showed a wide variety of experiences, which stimulated extensive class discussion. One common theme was that although students found it easy to navigate health insurer websites and find basic cost-sharing information, they had difficulty finding information about the process for appealing benefits denials. Many expressed surprise that their health plans did not cover vision or dental benefits, which sparked a conversation about the scope of insurance coverage and the historical divide between the medical field and other professions. Several students volunteered stories about their own experiences with the health care system, including prior authorization denials, sudden network changes threatening continuity of care, and high prescription costs. In written responses, many students acknowledged their own privilege, and reflected on the fact that people with limited education or fewer financial resources would likely experience even greater challenges in understanding these processes.[3] One student commented that the process of collecting this information was "both difficult and frustrating which surprised me. During class discussions of how hard it is to navigate different insurance systems, I never thought that would be as applicable to me[.]"

Later in the semester, in our section on end-of-life care issues, I prompt students to imagine that a loved one in their family requires long-term care at a skilled nursing facility that accepts Medicaid. For their research assignment, I direct them to spend no more than 20 minutes researching facilities near the family member's hometown, and reflect on whether they found sufficient information to help them make an informed decision. In class, many students expressed surprise at how challenging it was to find even the most basic information about whether a facility accepts Medicaid, as well as reliable quality information.[4] Then other students explained how they discovered Medicare.gov Care Compare (formerly Nursing Home Compare) as a resource for filtering facilities by payment type and quality metrics. Questions about why it is so difficult to find pricing information for long-term care facilities led to a robust discussion about self-pay as an option that simply isn't feasible for most Americans. Discussions about quality of care offered an opportunity for me to introduce Biden-era nursing home staffing mandates and the challenges they face.

Overall, I found that these two exercises, as well as a third relating to issues in health care quality, prompted students to connect course material to the lived realities of patients and families. By grounding class discussion in their own research experiences, students developed a more nuanced appreciation of the structural barriers that shape access to care.

Foundational Legal Research

State statutes, regulations, and case law play an important role in health law, particularly in the context of medical malpractice and related actions. This offers an ideal opportunity to help students develop their research skills. Statutory research exercises are particularly effective because they are narrow in scope, have a clear correct answer, and allow students to experiment with various research methods — including standard legal research tools like Lexis and Westlaw, as well as state websites, Google searches, and even (with all its flaws) generative artificial intelligence.

In our modules on tort liability of medical professionals, I include exercises that prompt students to identify our state's jurisdictional standards on three topics: (1) whether medical malpractice actions rely on local, national, or hybrid standards of care; (2) whether informed consent actions rely on a subjective or objective causation standard; and (3) the statute of limitations and statute of repose in medical malpractice actions. In later sections of the course, I ask students to find the state statutes and administrative code provisions establishing vaccination requirements for children entering elementary or secondary school, as well as the statutes and regulations governing emergency civil commitment of persons with mental illness.

In class, rather than my presenting these rules in lecture format, I invite one or more students to present their findings to the class. I have been impressed with their ability to both effectively locate all the relevant legal standards, as well as interpret and present their findings to the class. This is particularly so with the vaccination exercise — since our jurisdiction has several different statutes and regulations applicable to school vaccination, students are required to integrate high-level statutory requirements with more nuanced regulatory rules.

First-year law students are required to take a legal research course, but in their second and third years rarely have the opportunity to get faculty feedback on a targeted legal research exercise. By incorporating these research assignments as a regular part of class, students become more comfortable with both the process of legal research — and, more importantly, the reality that sometimes they may not be successful in finding the correct answer. Students learn by making mistakes: offering them the opportunity to do so in a low-stakes environment can build both confidence and a growth mindset as they develop their skills.[5]

Current Events and Recent Legal Developments

Student engagement on current events has increased significantly since I started using tiny research assignments. These exercises command students' attention because they speak to issues they are seeing in the news and likely already have questions about. Furthermore, because these assignments tend to be more flexible, with no single "correct" answer, they test students' creativity. Students also feel greater agency over their learning when an exercise offers them the opportunity to choose among various topics.

One of the first such exercises comes early in the semester when we discuss antidiscrimination laws applicable to health care. Even before doing the weekly readings and assignments, nearly every student had at least some baseline familiarity with the controversies surrounding emergency obstetric treatment in abortion-restrictive states under EMTALA, as well as the scope of Section 1557's protections against sex discrimination in health care. For their weekly research assignment, they were able to choose between these two topics. As part of their assigned readings, I provided them with

https://doi.org/10.1017/jme.2025.10215 Published online by Cambridge University Press

resources on recent HHS rulemaking in both these areas. Then, I asked them to find the most up-to-date information they could about legal challenges relating to these policies, and the current legal status of the HHS rules.

Given the complexity of these issues and the various regulatory actions, court challenges, and public reporting on these laws, I expected students to have more difficulty with this assignment. My expectations proved correct. Students were very engaged and enthusiastic in presenting their findings to the class and were fairly successful in identifying many of the relevant legal developments. However, their research was far from comprehensive, omitting some key developments; many also had trouble grasping the nuances of the case law relating to these HHS actions. Thus, class discussion and learning became a more collaborative process — students would introduce their key findings, which I would then clarify and supplement if necessary. From my perspective, the fact that some students struggled with this research task is actually a benefit of this particular assignment, not a shortcoming. Teachers understand that learning often comes from mistakes, which gives the students opportunities for self-reflection and aspirations for improvement.

Another benefit of this type of research assignment is that it helps students improve their critical evaluation skills in the context of media reporting. For the assignment on legislation impacting reproductive health care, as well as a second on state policies on psychedelic medicine, I ask students to begin their research by searching news media sources to identify one such law or policy. Then I ask them to find the original bill, law, or regulation itself, and reflect on whether it was accurately represented in the media report.

Finally, this type of exercise can help strengthen students' basic case law research skills, and their understanding of how judicial decisions can impact the interpretation and validity of statutes. In our sections on organ transplantation, for example, students are asked to find case law challenging the National Organ Transplant Act prohibition on payment or other "valuable consideration" for the transfer of organs. In our section on research regulation, they are asked to find a recent lawsuit in which the plaintiffs are seeking compensatory or injunctive relief related to injuries resulting from participation in research trials. As with the statutory research described above, students do fairly well with this task — both in terms of finding a broad scope of relevant cases, and in presenting their varied findings to the class.

Taken together, current events-based research assignments can function as an important bridge between foundational legal doctrine and real-world dynamics. By inviting students to investigate unfolding regulatory developments, evaluate the accuracy of media reporting, and examine how courts interpret statutes and regulations; these exercises cultivate both research and analytical skills. Even when students struggle with the assignments, the process deepens their understanding of the complexity and nuance of health law.

Lessons Learned and Room for Improvement

The key to making these assignments effective learning and assessment tools is to provide students with very clear instructions — both on the specific questions they are being asked to research, and on the format in which they should present their responses. Over time, I've learned that many of the assumptions I once made about students' ability to interpret broad or open-ended directives no longer hold. Because I want students to focus their efforts on the substantive research, rather than guessing at my expectations, I've become very intentional about how I design each research prompt and quiz question to avoid any possible ambiguities. For example, in our module on health care quality, I give the following prompt:

> Find a news article, research study, government report, or other reliable source from the past two years that provides either quantitative (based on numerical or statistical data) or qualitative (interpretive, grounded in subjective experiences) information about a particular health care quality issue in the United States.
>
> Provide a citation and link for the source you found and write a one- to two-sentence description of its findings.
>
> • *Example: Latoya Hill, Samantha Artiga, and Usha Ranji, Racial Disparities in Maternal and Infant Health: Current Status and Efforts to Address Them (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2022; https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/racial-disparities-in-maternal-and-infant-health-current-status-and-key-issues/) - Finding that pregnancy-related mortality rates among Black and American Indian Alaska Native women are over three and two times higher (respectively) than those for white women (41.4 and 26.2 vs. 13.7 per 100,000).*

The goal of the assignment is as clear as possible: Investigate current research related to health care quality. I specify the types of sources they should be looking for (news articles, research studies, government reports, or other reliable sources from the past two years), providing them with additional information about what qualifies as reliable research (qualitative or quantitative, defining each in case students aren't familiar with these terms). Finally, I provide a model of how the students should present their findings.

While some colleagues might criticize this approach as being too simplistic, I have found it to be necessary, particularly in the context of assignments that I grade on a weekly basis. Without directive prompts, many students struggle to present their findings clearly, whether in written format or in class discussion. And for the purposes of grading quiz questions, it is far easier for me to evaluate their work if I've clearly outlined my expectations. In student evaluations, several commented that having model answers for the weekly prompts was helpful.

On the other hand, I did receive some critical feedback. Some students expressed disappointment that I took points off quiz questions for what they described as "small and minor things," like omitting citations for cases. One student wrote that they felt they were "being penalized for non-substantive errors which made it hard to be excited to do the research for the question, even when the topic was interesting." I was surprised and a little concerned by this feedback, especially given the fact that I provided model answers for many (though not all) of the research prompts. Moreover, throughout the semester, I emphasized that students should present their work with the professionalism and precision that would be expected of them in practice after graduation — including, for example, full and accurate citations to cases, statutes, regulations, and secondary sources. Their feedback suggests to me that some students may lack a clear understanding of the expectations they will face in legal practice, particularly as to how their work will be assessed by supervising attorneys.

Overall, however, I found that incorporating short weekly research assignments into my health law survey course offered meaningful benefits. It significantly increased student engagement with the course material, prompted robust and thoughtful in-class discussion, and strengthened students' foundational lawyering skills. I encourage my health law colleagues to consider using "tiny research assignments" to foster active and practice-oriented learning.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at http://doi.org/10.1017/jme.2025.10215.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jme.2025.10215 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Disclosure. The author has no conflicts to disclose.

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1. Scott Freeman et al., "Active Learning Increases Student Performance in Science, Engineering, and Mathematics." *PNAS* 111, no. 23 (2014): 8410–15, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1319030111 (finding meaningful differences in learning outcomes when comparing active and passive learning in STEM fields); M. Prince, "Does Active Learning Work? A Review of the Research." *Journal of Engineering Education* 93, no. 3 (2004): 223–31, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2168-9830.2004.tb00809.x (defining active learning and summarizing evidence of its benefits in higher education).
2. I offer students the flexibility to research Loyola's student health insurance plan as an alternative to their own in recognition of the fact that some students may be uninsured or may be cautious about sharing information that signals their status (for example, as a Medicaid recipient). The prompt also emphasizes that students need not include any personal information about themselves or their plan in their response, and that the exercise is aimed primarily at collecting their reflections on the research process.
3. Here are two representative comments from student responses:
   - "When looking through the portal, I was a little concerned about the terminology used by the insurance companies because I imagine there are a lot of people who don't fully understand what things like 'co-insurance' are."
   - "When I looked up an appeal form through the website, the link was not up to date and did not work. I had to do a google search to find the correct form and even then,… [t]he appeal had to be filed within six months of the denial. To anybody in our class, that seems like a reasonable ask. However, to most Americans I feel like this cutoff and accessibility to the appeals process is quite strict and harsh."
4. Here are a few representative comments from student responses:
   - "If it was difficult for me, I can only imagine how difficult it is for elderly individuals, like my Nana[.]"
   - "I was shocked to see how little information was on the websites."
   - "One of the things that concerned me was the way each of these places were advertised. It seems like they're advertising their amenities or their community and not necessarily the information that one might need to make an informed decision on whether to pursue this as an option to obtain proper care. To get basic information, you need to actually contact the facility[.]"
   - "I think my biggest takeaway from this whole process is how much of a difference private healthcare can make for elderly adults."
5. Ann Sinsheimer and Omid Fotuhi, "Listening to Our Students: Fostering Resilience and Engagement to Promote Culture Change in Legal Education," *Legal Writing* 26, no. 1 (2022): 81–110, https://www.legalwritingjournal.org/article/33062-listening-to-our-students-fostering-resilience-and-engagement-to-promote-culture-change-in-legal-education (last visited December 19, 2025); Tammy Johnson and Caroline Strevens, "Mistakes as milestones: rethinking legal education for enhanced learning," *Law Teacher* 59, no. 1 (2025): 22–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/03069400.2025.2453313; Elissa Jacob, "Mistaken about Mistakes: Error Analysis as an Untapped Tool for Law School Success," *Pace Law Review* 45, no. 2 (2024): 445–80, https://doi.org/10.58948/2331-3528.2109.

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