

# Investigating Student Interest in the Addition of a Construction Law Topics Course

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In the Construction Management program, our goal is to prepare for the responsibilities imposed upon us during a construction project. A major responsibility among these is navigating the complex legal relationships inherent to a construction project. While Cal Poly offers one Construction Law course, students are underprepared for what they will face. This project is designed to gauge interest from the Cal Poly Construction Management student body in the addition of a Construction Law topics course. It also aims to understand if additional legal studies would better prepare students for their entrance into the industry. Students were asked to answer 9 questions regarding the proposed course. 6 survey, 2 free response, and one ranked voting question. The design of this survey sought to provide both quantitative and qualitative data which could be used to inform the Construction Management department of student interest in a CM Law topics course, and its potential subjects. Survey results confirmed student interest in an additional course. The survey also found that while students were satisfied with current classes, they did not feel prepared for interactions with the law during internships, and that a new CM Law course would better prepare them for their future responsibilities.

**Key Words:** Construction Law, Legal, Topics Course, Survey, Advanced Course

## Introduction

Under the Construction Management curriculum at Cal Poly, we have few required courses that pertain directly to law or the field of legal studies. Currently, CM 334: Construction Law is the only Construction Management course to focus entirely on legal subject matter. Additionally, while some other classes offer short lessons on construction legal subjects, they primarily focus on how law interacts with business. These courses include Bus 207: Business Law, and CM 443: Management of The Construction Firm. As a student, I have taken nearly all the courses necessary to complete my undergraduate education for Construction Management, and have gained industry experience through two summer internships. This project was inspired by personal experiences as an intern, which brought me to realize how commonly law and construction overlap during a project. This survey is designed to gauge student interest in a new Construction Law topics course and the content for that course, so that students can be better prepared for their future in the industry.

## Literature Review

With the nature of this project as a survey, an extensive literature review was not necessary. Primarily, the senior project, *Development of a Topics Course for Construction Law* by Julia Hoever was referenced to obtain some legal topics of interest for the survey, and two senior projects containing in-depth surveys were consulted for reference. The resources referenced can be found in the “References” section of this paper.

## Methodology

Data for this senior project was collected through a survey of the Cal Poly Construction Management student body. The survey primarily targeted both students with previous internship experience, and those who had completed CM 334: Construction Law, but all students were encouraged to apply. The survey was forwarded to students via the Construction Management department email. The survey was developed with the assistance of project SME Dan Knight providing critical feedback, and some subject matter was derived from a previous senior project conducted by Julia Hoefer. Overall, the survey was meant to collect data on student interest in an additional Construction Law Topics course, and the content of that course.

The survey was kept compact to increase the chances of more student responses. Before the survey questions were listed, a short survey description was included, describing the purpose of the survey, as well as a course description for CM 334: Construction Law. A course description of CM 334 was included to ensure students were familiar with the content and information foundational to the survey, in case they had not yet taken CM 334 or no longer remembered the content of that class.

Question one asks respondents what year they are within the Construction Management program, in order to gain a better understanding of the age of survey respondents. Question two asked the participant if they had internship/work experience in construction, and if so, how much. This was meant to determine if their experience in the field would affect their later answers in the survey. Question three was designed for those with internship experience and asked if they had any interaction with the law during their internships, and whether their Cal Poly experience had prepared them for those interactions. Question four asked participants if they had taken CM 334, and was meant to gauge their experience in the CM curriculum. Question five asked those responding “Yes” if they were satisfied with the material covered, what else they wish the class had covered. Question six asked respondents who had taken CM 334 if they believed an additional CM Law elective would better prepare students for the industry. Question seven asked respondents who hadn’t taken CM 334 if they believed an additional CM Law elective would better prepare students for the industry. Question eight was meant for those who answered “Yes” to either of the previous two questions, and asked what course philosophy they believed would be of most interest to students. Finally, question nine asked participants to rank legal subjects from most to least relevant to a career in the construction industry, to help determine the most applicable subjects for an additional topics course.

## Survey Analysis

**Question #1** recorded the year of each student who participated in the survey. The information provided by this question is critical for analyzing the following survey results because older students have more experience within the Cal Poly Construction Management program, and are more likely to have a full grasp of what is missing from the program. The results of question one show that the most common respondents were 4<sup>th</sup> years (33%), followed by 3<sup>rd</sup> years (30%), and 5<sup>th</sup> years (17%). With experienced students making up the majority of the survey body, the results of this survey can be viewed more seriously as an analysis of the current curriculum.

## 1. What year are you?



Figure 1: Response to Question #1: What year are you?

**Question #2** took note of the amount of summer internships that each respondent had completed prior to taking the survey. The results of this question show that the vast majority (90%) of respondents had completed at least one internship in the construction industry, with 30% completing 3+ internships, 23% completing two, and 30% completing one, while only 10% had not completed an internship. The high percentage of respondents with internship experience indicates this survey is capable of providing an informed student consensus.

## 2. Do you have internship/work experience in the construction industry? if so, how much?



Figure 2: Response to Question #2: Do you have internship/work experience in the construction industry?

**Question #3** was a free response question for those who indicated they had construction internship experience in question two. This question asked if respondents had any interaction with construction law during their interhips, and if they felt prepared for those experiences. After analyzing the responses indicated that the majority of respondents had interacted with law in some capacity during their internships (62%). According to a further breakdown of respondents who interacted with construction law, students were generally unprepared for their interactions with law (60%).

3. If yes, did you have interactions with Construction Law of any kind during your internship? If so, were you prepared for these experiences?

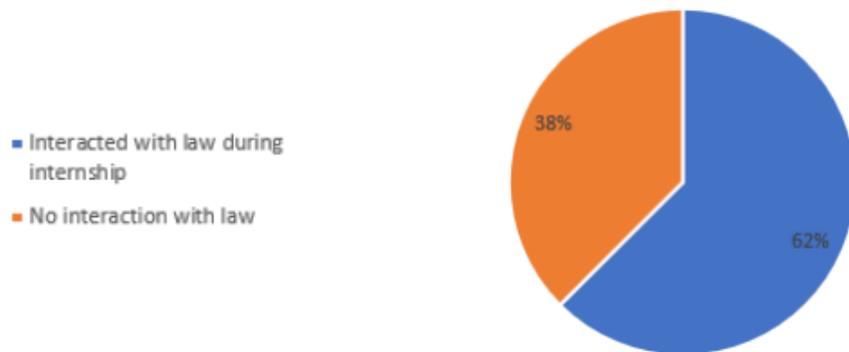


Figure 3: Response to Question #3: If yes, did you have interactions with Construction Law of any kind during your internship? If so, were you prepared for these experiences?

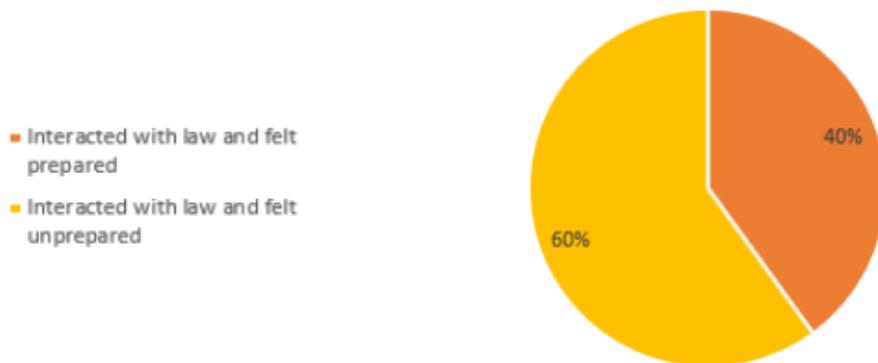


Figure 4: Breakdown of "Interacted with construction law during internship" answers from Figure 3

**Question #4** asked participants if they had completed CM 334: Construction Law at the time of taking the survey. According to the survey results, the majority of students who completed the survey had completed CM 334 (83.3%).

#### 4. Have you taken CM 334: Construction Law?



Figure 5: Response to Question #4: Have you taken CM 334: Construction Law

**Question #5** gathered data from students who had completed CM 334 using a free response prompt. The question asked whether they were satisfied with the course material, and if they had any suggestions for additional topics. After analyzing the responses, a majority of students (64%) were satisfied with the material they learned. While they were satisfied with the material, many comments were accompanied by suggestions for improvement. Popular suggestions included: Asking for additional contract law and analysis modules, study of employment law and dispute resolution, and noting they wished the class was split into deeper legal subjects, such as the legal implications of subcontractor and owner relationships, insurance law, etc.

#### 5. If you have taken CM 334, were you satisfied with the material covered? What additional topics, if any, do you wish the class covered?

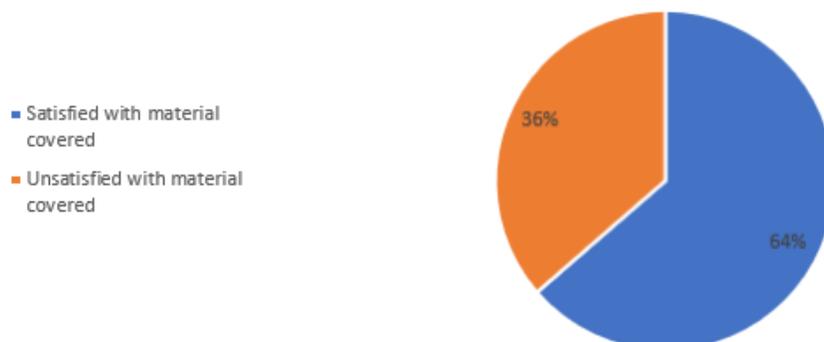


Figure 6: Response to Question #5: If you have taken CM 334, were you satisfied with the material covered? What additional topics, if any, do you wish the class covered?

**Question #6** took a poll of students who had completed CM 334, asking them if they believed an additional CM Law Topics Course would better prepare students for their internships or entrance into the industry. According to survey results, the majority of students agreed (72%) that the addition of an optional CM Law topics course would be beneficial (Answers of “N/A” were excluded).

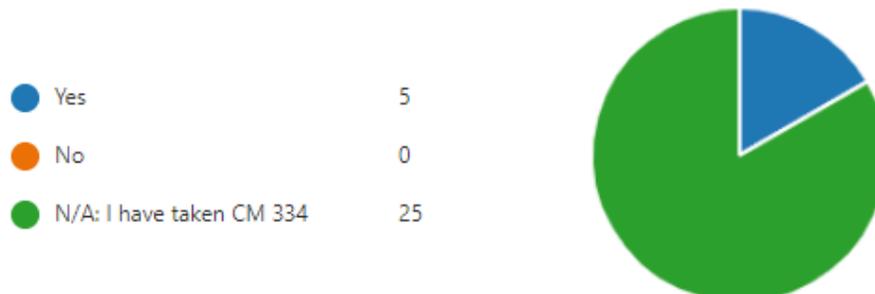
6. If you **HAVE** taken CM 334, do you believe that a CM Law Topics Course in addition to CM 334 would better prepare students for their internships/entrance into the industry?



*Figure 7:* Response to Question #6: If you HAVE taken CM 334, do you believe that a CM Law Topics Course in addition to CM 334 would better prepare students for their internships/entrance into the industry?

**Question #7** took a poll of students who had not completed CM 334, asking them if they believed an additional CM Law Topics Course would better prepare students for their internships or entrance into the industry. According to the survey results, 100% of students who had not taken CM 334 believed an additional, optional topics course would be beneficial (Answers of N/A were excluded).

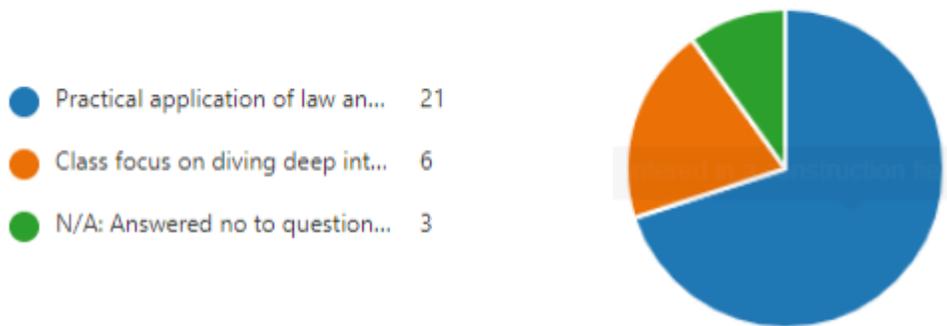
7. If you have **NOT** taken CM 334, do you believe a CM Law Topics Course in addition to CM 334 would better prepare students for their internships/entrance into the industry?



*Figure 8:* Response to Question #7: If you have NOT taken CM 334, do you believe a CM Law Topics Course in addition to CM 334 would better prepare students for their internships/entrance into the industry?

**Question #8** focused on participants who answered “Yes” to either question 6 or 7. The question polled students on what course philosophy they would find most beneficial to their education out of two options. Option one: Focus on practical application of law and related subjects commonly encountered in a construction field office. Or option two: Class focus on diving deep into a specific legal discipline, more focus on depth and understanding of legal theory. According to collected data, students significantly preferred a class focused on the practical applications of law (77.8%), compared to a deep dive on a single subject (22.2%). (Answers of N/A were excluded).

8. If yes to question 6 or 7, which of the following course philosophies would you find to be more beneficial and/or be of more interest to students?



*Figure 9:* Response to Question #8: If yes to question 6 or 7, which of the following course philosophies would you find to be more beneficial and/or be of more interest to students?

**Question #9** asked respondents to rank a variety of construction related legal subjects from most to least relevant, based on whether they felt the subject was interesting/relevant to a career in the construction industry. Among the possible answers, certain choices stood out as clear favorites among participants. Contract law was heavily favored as either a first or second option, and Dispute Resolution/Claims was generally placed as a top three pick. Additionally, Employment/Labor Law was commonly chosen with one of the top three picks among participants. While some participants held interest in Real Property law, Licensing/Insurance Law, and Tort Negligence, they were commonly chosen among the least relevant subjects by a majority of participants.

9. Of these subjects, which do you find most interesting/relevant to a career in the construction industry?  
Rank from most to least relevant.

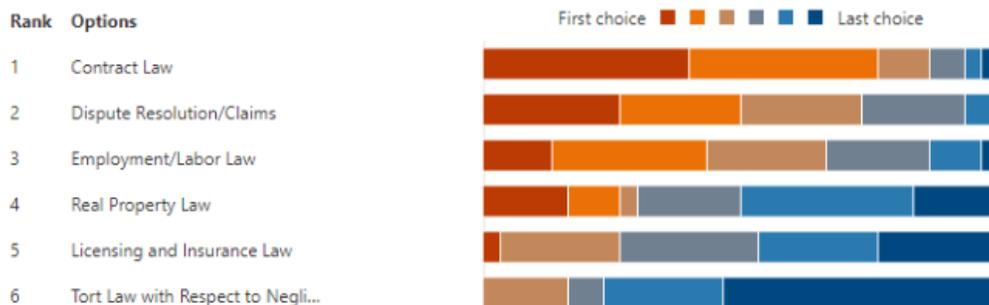


Figure 10: Response to Question #9: Of these subjects, which do you find most interesting/relevant to a career in the construction industry? Rank from most to least relevant.

## Conclusion

This study sought to gauge student interest in an optional Construction Law Topics Course, and the best potential subject matter for such a course. In addition, another goal was to determine student satisfaction with the Construction Management departments only current law offering, CM 334. The inspiration for this course comes from a desire to provide CM students with additional electives so they can more deeply pursue subjects of interest, and become better prepared for their transition into the workforce. From analyzing the data gathered during this survey, 76.6% of Construction Management students surveyed agree that the addition of a CM Law topics course would better prepare them for life outside college. This statistic ties in with the data received from from question three, which determined that of students who interacted with construction law during their internships, most felt they were not prepared to understand that they experienced (60%). Additionally, while students did not feel prepared for their experiences during internships, they were generally satisfied with the content of CM 334, with 64% of surveyed students feeling satisfied with the course material. This inconsistency is reconciled by analyzing the responses directly. In this case, students seemed satisfied with the content of CM 334, but consistently suggested in depth additional subjects such as contract, employment and insurance law, which may be better covered in an additional class.

Students were also polled on the course philosophy and curriculum of the proposed topics course. When asked what course philosophy they would find most beneficial, 77.7% of students preferred a class which focused on the practical applications of law, including case studies and contract writing/analysis. Additionally respondents were polled on the legal subjects they believed were most applicable to their career in construction. Respondents consistently picked contract law, dispute resolution/claims, real property law, and employment/labor law as important subjects for their future. In addition, these selections align with the most commonly mentioned topic suggestions recorded from question five.

Through analysis of this survey, a conclusion can be successfully drawn that there is both interest and need for additional education in the field of Construction Law. Sufficient interest has been demonstrated such that an adequate method to provide this education is through the addition of an optional Construction Law topics course, so that those preparing to enter the workforce in applicable fields may be better prepared. Additionally, based on the information from this survey, information can be presented to the Construction Management Department regarding both the most popular course philosophy, and subjects for such a course.

### **Future Research**

The focus of this senior project survey was to determine student interest in additional CM Law topics course, and the general legal subjects for that courses curriculum. A future senior project could be successful by applying the results of this survey, and working to create a functional, fully fledged course curriculum. By interviewing potential teachers and industry veterans, a student could determine the lessons and lectures that would best compose a successful CM Law topics course.

## **References**

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