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The Role of Legal Clinics in Community Communication

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ABSTRACT

Legal clinics have evolved from being mere educational tools for law students to becoming vital platforms for community empowerment and communication. This paper examines the multifaceted role of legal clinics in advancing community communication, not only by delivering legal services but by fostering civic participation, educating the public on legal rights, and encouraging collaborative problem-solving. Drawing on historical precedents and contemporary models, the study highlights how clinics act as intermediaries between legal institutions and marginalized populations. The paper analyzes case studies, strategic engagement approaches, and technological tools used in legal clinics to enhance community outreach and literacy. It also investigates the systemic challenges clinics face, including resource limitations, community mistrust, and the balance between legal aid and education. Ultimately, the paper argues for a transformative model of clinical legal education that integrates communication strategies and grassroots collaboration to strengthen community agency and improve justice delivery.

Keywords: Legal clinics, community communication, clinical legal education, civic engagement, legal literacy, community legal education (CLE), access to justice.

INTRODUCTION

Attention to community communication in clinical law is on the rise. Most discussions of community focused on the services the clinic would provide, explicitly aimed at a large group of people. A community model of direct legal service provision differs from bar association public service efforts in that a community model helps focus the goals and methods of the clinical program. Each community's uniqueness, including issues facing the individuals therein, is the starting point for developing a program tailored to that community's resources and needs. Clinical law programs can play various roles in advancing community communication, generally falling under broad categories of participation in communications planning, research, implementation, or monitoring, and litigation. The benefits of community communication include an amelioration of the consequences of a toxic facility or criminalization of poverty, reduced alienation and political avoidance, and a focus on structural solutions to community problems. Law offers multiple mechanisms for community participation and advocacy, including traditional litigation, administrative advocacy, and non-legal advocacy efforts. A blended approach that emphasizes different strategies for different communication issues is suggested. Conducting effective community communication requires confronting a host of questions about the communities in question, the nature of the communication issue, resources available, and the role of the clinic in the planning and execution. Some questions are easily committed to paper, such as the community to be engaged, the outreach strategy, and resource availability. Others, like the degree to which the clinic should aspire to a leadership role, are more theoretical; determining answers demands a far less straightforward inquiry [1, 2].

Overview of Legal Clinics

Legal clinics, established within law schools, help students gain practical skills while offering legal services to disadvantaged groups. Defined as organizations assisting law students in training through client advising and representation, they also educate the public on relevant legal issues. Most civil law clinics, focused on in this paper, function as university-facilitated service clinics with a physical on-campus presence. They typically manage less complex cases and do not maintain long-term client relationships due to student availability. Law students often explore broader legal questions with a resident legal expert while providing advice. Traditional civil law clinics incorporate educational exercises leading to the creation of artefacts, which are indirectly beneficial to clients. Besides policy clinics, community outreach and legal societal engagement are included, where no artefacts are produced. Civic education initiatives typically involve presenting legal issues, researching community needs, and informing about legislative changes, rather than direct representation. Legal services span various categories in academic law clinics. They represent individual or collective clients, including organizations, in matters like traffic violations, debt disputes, and asylum claims, within both courts and administrative processes. In legal contexts, individual clients refer to persons, while non-individual entities like organizations are also recognized as "clients" [3, 4].

Historical Context of Legal Clinics

Though legal clinics are most commonly synonymous with student-staffed legal aid offices for low-income clients, several law school programs directly augment access to justice by providing community education and mobilization services. While academic appreciation for the role of community legal education is well established, this topic has received little scholarly attention compared to other forms of clinical activity. Little understanding remains regarding the historical context of legal clinics, specifically outside the scope of direct representation. A review of early twentieth-century documents detailing the activities of a pioneering clinical program highlights the many long-lingering roles of law school clinics, many of which have yet to be fully developed. In addition to providing legal counsel and education, this program involved collaborative systems-building efforts, such as the establishment of an industrial accident board and a local legal aid society, akin to contemporary community lawyering. The modern legal clinic is typically viewed in all its myriad forms solely as a legal services office for low-income clients, with its remaining roles and contexts overlooked. It is crucial to share a broader understanding of the historical context of legal clinics, to survey current activities, and to assess the need for historical research beyond the immediacy of direct representation. This article highlights the many civic articulations of legal clinics through historical documentation of a particularly ambitious twenty-year-old program, underscoring many early roles that remain prominent and foundational to contemporary legal clinics but which have yet to be fully developed. Founded in 1891, New York University School of Law's clinic offered co-curricular opportunities for students to practice law in low-income neighborhoods across Manhattan, desperate for legal services provided by non-employer representatives. It featured an extraordinary spectrum of activity, extending far beyond subsidiary representation [5, 6].

Community Engagement Strategies

Legal clinics in community colleges often approach CCE as a satellite program that can be attached to an existing transactional clinic and, it is hoped, run smoothly as long as appropriate switches are flipped. A small assortment of reasonable "engagement strategies" can be applied in the manner of seasoning to add a splash of flavor without changing the basic character of the meal. The result is likely a CCE version of the existing project-focused legal clinic. One step removed from this perspective is the idea that a full-blown community engagement program is desirable, but that it is so complicated that it requires either a dedicated program director or a full-blown center to oversee and coordinate it. On the other end of the continuum is the view that community engagement should be pursued holistically at the level of the clinic as a whole; that the only true community engagement animates every aspect of the clinic; and that the effort must be sufficiently complete to effectuate a radical transformation in the clinic's identity and activity. Both of these approaches are problematic. The assumption that clinics can pick and choose from an assortment of community engagement approaches, while requiring only a limited investment of resources, leads to poorer outcomes than those that derive from a thoughtful rethinking of an existing clinic's focus and methodologies. In the worst case, it can lead to excessive cynicism about even the potential of community engagement to effectuate transformative practice. In addition to remaining vigilant against the temptation to reduce CCE to a series of interchangeable, plug-in strategies, clinics should guard against falling into the opposite pitfall of presupposing a static definition of the "community." Imperfect as it may be, an understanding of community as a geographically based polity is at least a workable starting point. Locating a clinic in a specific community and asking students to explore that community through the lenses of class, race, and culture creates opportunities for shared

discussion of common experiences in the community and thoughtful discussion of issues of power, advantage, and powerlessness [7, 8].

Impact on Community Communication

There are various approaches to Community Legal Education (CLE), with a common one involving a legal aid or public interest lawyer discussing legal rights and responsibilities with community members. In-depth CLE functions as a community development effort, allowing lawyers to collaborate with communities over time, clarifying pertinent issues, providing legal education, and aiding in developing social services. Practical CLE employs alternative methods, such as cartoons and drama, catering to pre-literate and literate adults who prefer learning styles beyond reading and writing. Non-lawyers also facilitate community educational interventions, like health campaigns targeting poor communities, aiming to change economic and legal circumstances. Legal clinics may sponsor such interventions, focusing on changing public attitudes toward lawyers, often using traditional media. While legal clinics tackle issues, they don't typically target a specific community. CLE aims to teach community members about the law, commonly conducted by lawyers who transfer legal literacy to those less knowledgeable. However, this approach assumes community passivity and replaces communal wisdom with legal expertise, often limiting focus to issues deemed "legalistic" by lawyers, which may overlook community values [9, 10].

Case Studies of Successful Legal Clinics

When the Reid Court decision left Minnesota's families with income below 77% of the Federal Poverty Guideline ineligible for most publicly funded legal representation, lawyers and bar association members wondered how to make formerly newly funded, already local programs work in a "rural" state in which civil legal aid was already seated throughout the state. The Minnesota Justice Foundation (MJF), which had begun to fill gaps in existing service delivery systems in Minnesota with a few selected projects that it funded, was designated to facilitate the statewide project and assist in organizing a local chapter to take charge of it. Early steps established that the formal "game plan" must include the following important implementation variables: What model/types of local programs would be most effective and acceptable in Minneapolis/Saint Paul; how to work with an existing, well-established bar chapter. A Minnesota plan meeting had been held, establishing what was believed might be a fairly effective approach. It was clear that simply importing an "urban" program was not appropriate. The legal community had already rejected some of the more common plans tried elsewhere. The primary setting chosen was Coleman Place Apartments, a large public housing project on the north side of Minneapolis with an active resident council formed as an affiliate of the Minneapolis Public Housing Rehabilitation and Development Advisory Committee. The legal action to stop the Minneapolis Housing Authority was, however, only one of many concerns articulated by the resident council. The need for basic legal information on matters such as eviction prevention, landlord-tenant relations, public housing rules and regulations interpretation, domestic relations, government benefits eligibility, and access to public records was immediate and urgent. Other matters, such as legislative advocacy and individual problems, involving residents' individual actions before public agencies or enforcement of legal rights, were requested soon thereafter [11, 12].

Challenges Faced by Legal Clinics

Historically, the concept of "law clinics" was in part a response to the failure and inaccessibility of the justice system, as a response to social justice issues that could not be solved purely through institutional means. The goals of law clinics in this sense extend far beyond the possibility of providing bare legal defense; even when legal defense was the main aim, clinics would focus on social justice and a holistic understanding of the law, which includes participatory democracy and community organizing. Thus, a critique is needed on what constitutes a law clinic and what the objectives of a law clinic are. Because of the changed focus of law clinics on wins in cases, this critique would need to be much stronger than in debates on whether law clinics followed only the legal or the social model of law. Two objectives in this critique will be pursued: first, that community education means more than conveying "legal" knowledge; and second, that a narrower focus on domestic policy and participation is counterproductive, also on its terms. The first question is: What constitutes community education? This is perhaps an easier question to answer, but no less important. Community education can be defined in a narrow way – any education of a community and in a broad one, any process of interaction with the community. Medium can be spoken or written words, pictures, video, plays, or songs. Again, education can be defined in a broad sense – learning, knowledge gain, or a narrow one – a teaching process. It can be about content – legal knowledge (or other knowledge): It can be about process – discussing issues, deliberation, learning how to talk and ask questions. "Legal" education, then, would be a narrowly defined process of educating communities how to convince the legal system to act justly and fairly. Using this narrow definition, many

social justice organizations, labor unions, and human rights NGOs around the world participate in legal education. However, community education must be seen also in a broader light. Community education need not have an identifiable structure or medium; it can exist in informal discussions in a bar or alley. However, even so broadly defined, “community education” that is solely teleological is counterproductive [13, 14].

The Role of Technology in Legal Clinics

Legal clinics unite students, teachers, researchers, practitioners, and institutions to address unmet legal needs in a local community through public legal education, community development projects, and service delivery in the public interest. Engaged scholarship seeks to create hybrid knowledge and public understanding to redefine how legal knowledge is produced and shared. Such an epistemic practice connects a university to the wider world and local communities to address social problems. Law schools engage with local communities as legal clinics. Beginning with Philippe Sands’s original vision of “the precinct of law as the laboratory, the courtroom as the stage, and the lawyer as the player”, law clinics offer law students insight into the complexities and richness of law and legal practice. Legal work involves grappling with the nebulous boundary of factual uncertainty wherever facts are in debate. Legal work, up against powerful public institutions, highly educated counterparts, and impatient presidents, is a constant engagement in negotiation and persuasion of relevant facts as well as relevant law. The most important values and the advantages one can have from legal clinics are communication skills. Clinic students draft pleadings, interview clients, mediate disputes, and persuade judges- essential skills for law school graduates. Understanding institutions is today’s lawyers must understand how to work within complex administrative and regulatory systems to advocate effectively for their clients. This requires knowledge of how to better prepare a case, knowing which documents are essential, obtaining these documents, interviewing witnesses with knowledge of these documents, securing favorable decisions by administrative judges whose work is governed by thousands of pages of regulations, and understanding how administrative agencies impact and affect the lives of clients. Another is benefiting society. Students work on behalf of clients facing human rights abuses, environmental neglect, and legal problems arising from poverty and inequality. Classroom theory is translated into real services for real people- clients who may be homeless, mentally ill, or victimized by a major company. For students, this approach makes clinic courses spiritually rewarding [15, 16].

Collaboration with Other Organizations

At least nine articles on pandemic-related law issues were published in conjunction with the Law School’s “COVID-19 Legal Forum” program. The Georgia Legal Services Prohibition against Discrimination program invites representatives to annual clinic meetings to discuss important issues for the program and individual clients. An event to address eviction updates and related legal rights was held. At the Law School’s initiative, Women’s Mobile Health Unit community engagement efforts joined with partners from the Georgia Health Law Partnership, Georgia Legal Services, and other organizations to address the closure of a pediatric clinic serving low-income Athens families. A call-in session on document-scanning issues related to the federal immigration rule changes, focused on at-risk Libertad recipients, was held with the Latino Community. A gathering on eviction updates and related legal rights featured members from the Georgia Legal Services’ Economic Security Program and Housing Justice Project. The formation of the Georgia Coalition for a Healthy Future by Voices for Georgia’s Children and others included a gathering on pre-existing condition issues related to COVID-19. As a member of the Statewide Pro Bono Project (SPBP) Advisory Board, the Law School encourages students to join the project on social media chapters and participate in the On the Move project. Petitions for students to help with calling clients to ensure they receive paperwork were made in conjunction with Georgia Legal Services. The Clarke County School District has collaborated with the Law School to address numerous issues affecting students and families of migrant agricultural workers for over a decade. Additionally, a request for assistance with the texting-while-driving ordinance resulted in a joint effort to undertake a community survey of possible ordinance ramifications. Such outreach initiatives expand community awareness of Civil Clinic work, and some collaborative entities assist students in learning more about certain areas of law [17, 18].

Future Trends in Legal Clinics

The clinics highlighted in this Article have met essential needs within under-resourced communities. They guide individuals and companies in navigating legal protections crucial for their success, helping to safeguard valuable ideas and brands against misuse by powerful entities. Clients benefit from assistance in forming businesses, reviewing contracts, raising funds, and achieving significant visibility across various media without infringing on others’ rights. Communities express gratitude and enthusiasm for these efforts. For instance, En-Gende Mente in Costa Rica utilized strategy guides crafted with students for

understanding IP issues. Filmmakers at the Berkeley clinic created acclaimed documentaries on legislative matters relevant to their Los Angeles communities. Students involved with LASC's immigrant workers' rights projects established enduring connections with workers and activists, many opting to work pro bono post-graduation. Legal clinics do not rely on the uncertain goodwill of government or private actors struggling to maintain a fraying social safety net. They empower communities as active participants, amplifying their needs and rights within existing systems that government and private actors use to pursue collective goals. Clinics promote inclusive justice and participatory governance, striving for a responsive rule of law for the broader public. Furthermore, legal clinics can shape effective institutions of public reason from an overlooked economic landscape. They instruct in planning, discovery, deliberation, and resource allocation within these emerging public frameworks. In their advocacy role, clinics can create a rich information base aligned with local socio-economic interests and disseminate it to policy-makers and business leaders while ensuring accountability through lobbying and exposure efforts. Most importantly, clinics foster a collective identity and empower individuals often seen as unworthy or neglected in the public discourse. In doing this, they inspire a public capable of envisioning and striving for a just economy, facilitating agency in their transformation [19, 20].

Policy Recommendations

Community lawyering is a practice embraced by many public interest organizations globally, varying in meaning based on historical, cultural, and legal contexts. For instance, a community religious institution may sue to operate its business while a historic preservation trust may seek to access school facilities. As the U.S. concepts of community lawyering gain international traction, they evolve in meaning and expression. This complexity challenges the notion that community lawyering follows a uniform path in public interest advocacy. Clinics must identify challenges and opportunities for their future, with marketing strategies that often overlook local factors. Additionally, broader policymaking faces criticism for lacking community engagement at early development stages, leading to assumptions about community needs and a fragmented approach that neglects significant issues. Such obstacles also limit research perspectives, making it essential to include community reflections in setting research agendas. Without this involvement, there is a risk of misidentifying issues, diverting resources from actual community needs. Therefore, the significance of contextualized policies is vital in promoting community involvement and transforming fragmented strategies into cohesive research and planning efforts [21, 22].

Measuring the Impact of Legal Clinics

As this special issue goes to press, considerable effort has been devoted to promoting the participation of legal clinics at Lavaud, Janus Cuny, and to assembling a volume on their roles. There are some repeated themes about the nature and role of clinics in community communication. Several perspectives on clinics in light of the specific community from which the clinical project has arisen and on the specific, often new, communities that the particular legal clinic seeks to serve. Some of those appointments may be taken from work in progress because the goal of the research has not been unachieved. There is clarity about the totality of a legal clinic opportunity and the immense rewards of working with community communication. Legal clinics are often poorly understood beasts. There is much curiosity and interest, but there is also considerable suspicion. Some hopeful beneficiaries inquire, "What do you want?" Legal practices, long viewed as mercenary and supine supporters of reigning powers, are often lensed to reportedly harrowing mistakes, old wives' tales, and due process horror stories. Many have adoption levels of defiance and distrust rarely experienced in the Supreme Court Cases Fund, which relate to horrible abuse stories on Law and Order. Keenly aware of such concerns are clinic supervisors who bring innovative "apparent truths" and "practice experience" lightly blurred into instinctive examinations of norms, rules, and law-making. Ironically, the very fear that concurrently elevates clinical teaching and learning and acknowledges challenges [23, 24].

Ethical Considerations in Legal Clinics

The content of legal clinics can raise ethical issues not related to lawyering itself. Clinics must specifically avoid conflicts of interest: ethical quandaries relating to joint development across clients. This can arise more easily than it might seem. Media coverage of clinics as community resources can, for example, raise the specter of increased attention from police or other entities that may take advantage of the clinic's service. The perception of threat from community channels can, in turn, result in an increased unwillingness to participate in clinics, which may cull those most in need. The architecture of clinics needs to mediate this perceived threat in two particular ways: as widely as possible, and without a sense of 'cherry-picking'. As widely as possible, the design of early-stage resource access routes should target, in its outreach, all channels capable of allowing community access, while monitoring their public modus

operandi. Once the clinics are in place, they need to use wider societal forms and routes to communicate both positive and negative issues surrounding flyer and resource misuse. Domestically, this includes the provision of possible client selections other than those that would usually be restricted by clinics concerning lawyers' unprivileged grievance handling. Community resources must not privilege other positive aspects or modes of engagement surrounding emphasized topics between themselves, and all seats should be viewed as 'flooded' by prospects, should have an arresting flyer, and check whether established outreach arrangements for accessing them are still in place. It is important to have a broad awareness of the design and outreach of the resulting clinics. This involves thinking about tracking fairly or establishing time slots for encouraging gradual changes around client perceptions of threats to their progress, even in case other clients' inappropriate understanding does occur in the meantime. This focus on community reasoning also allows the construction of similar but appearance-different potential clinics and resources to reach the same clientele twice. Conversely, the simple and cheap denial of ethical quandaries can foster resource ignorance around forthcoming local media interview channels and calls for random venue switches that result in easier tasks for the cooperative professors instead [25, 26].

The Importance of Cultural Competence

Children needing protective services (CPS) and the community often clash due to significant racial, class, language, and cultural differences that hinder communication and breed mistrust. Legal clinics focused on community communication aim to bridge these gaps, requiring cultural competence, offering services agreed upon by both the legal clinic and community representatives. However, cultural competence goes deeper; it involves recognizing one's ignorance and bravely engaging with the unknown. This engagement fosters discussions that evolve through repeated interactions. Additionally, it necessitates the development of dialogue tools tailored to diverse backgrounds. Recognizing cultural disparities is vital, yet understanding their origins and implications is essential for progress. The clash between egalitarian ideals and historical realities creates barriers to effective communication, despite good intentions from both sides. Collaborative efforts, such as conference calls between CPS and community representatives, aim to navigate cultural differences, yet often stumble due to miscommunications. Moving meetings to the community is a crucial first step, alongside fostering an understanding of the historical and systemic issues underlying cultural differences. Participants pointed out that what appeared to be minor differences could lead to significant misunderstandings, exacerbated by some individuals' obliviousness to cultural nuances. Misinterpretations by outside observers, perceiving community behaviors as disrespectful, could reflect a need to practice humility and patience. It is vital, however, to maintain structures that build trust while avoiding complacency in the face of confusion [27-31].

CONCLUSION

Legal clinics are no longer peripheral academic exercises; they are central agents of social transformation and community empowerment. By engaging with communities through tailored communication strategies and legal education, clinics create reciprocal knowledge flows that demystify the law and make it accessible. Their historical role, innovative use of media and technology, and evolving collaborative networks position them as vital public institutions capable of nurturing civic dialogue and trust in the legal system. However, their effectiveness depends on a critical understanding of the community's unique contexts, a commitment to inclusive communication, and the sustained integration of educational and legal service models. As legal clinics continue to adapt and grow, their role in bridging the gap between communities and the justice system will be indispensable to fostering equitable and participatory governance.

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