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Professor Andrew Horwitz's Post

Experiential Education: Fundamental and Critical

Posted by Andy Horwitz on 04/21/2015 at 05:40 PM



I joined the faculty at Roger Williams University School of Law just over 20 years ago because I saw that the school was dedicated to a very special mission. The law school's founders understood then what so many other schools have started to see now: that **experiential education is a fundamental and critical part of a law school education**.

Understanding the law is, of course, the foundation upon which all else is built. But unless and until one has started to put that foundational education into practice, one has hardly begun the transition to becoming an effective lawyer.

As I started my journey with RWU Law back in 1994, we founded two in-house clinical programs and two clinical externship programs – better than many schools at the time, but still less than ideal. Many students had the opportunity to enjoy some form of experiential education, but many did not. Some students engaged in *pro bono* legal work outside of the law school, but many did not. While all students were required to take courses involving simulated legal work, some students graduated with little to no exposure to the actual practice of law.

Fast forward 20 years and what a different world we have created. RWU Law now **guarantees** that every single qualified student can have **a substantial experiential education experience**, either through an in-house clinic, a field clinic, or a clinical externship. Many of our students will enjoy more than one such experience. Every single student will perform **at least 50 hours of *pro bono* legal service** outside of the law school prior to graduation; many will perform far more than that, including an ever-growing **Alternative Spring Break** program.

Our experiential education programs continue to grow and expand to meet the changing demands and interests of our students -- and the needs of the community. Where we once had two in-house clinics, we now have three: the **Criminal Defense Clinic**, the **Immigration Clinic**, and the **Community Economic Development Clinic**. Where we had two clinical externship programs, we now have six: the **Public Interest Clinical Externship Program**, the **Judicial Clinical Externship Program**, the **Prosecution Clinical Externship Program**, the **Corporate Counsel Clinical Externship Program**, the **Environmental and Land Use Clinical Externship Program**, and the **Washington D.C. Semester-in-Practice Program**. Students can work in externship placements two, three or five days per week. And students can find placements not only in Rhode Island and the surrounding communities, but anywhere in the country or even in the world (we have a student this semester in a clinical externship placement in South Korea!).

I'm particularly excited about the newest member of our experiential education family -- the **Veterans Disability Appeals Field Clinic**, which will open in the fall of this year. Working in conjunction with Chisholm, Chisholm & Kilpatrick, a Providence-based law firm that is the national leader for representing veterans with disabilities, our students will have the opportunity to represent those who have become disabled in service to our country seek and obtain the justice that they deserve. It will be an extraordinary learning experience for the students who are enrolled.

As I look back over my 20 years at RWU Law and at the extraordinary development we have seen, I could not be prouder. We have in many ways become the very school that I envisioned when I joined the faculty, and we show no signs of stopping. With each passing year I become more and more confident that when our graduates walk across that stage in May they do so fully prepared to enter the legal profession in service to the community. I can't wait to see what the next years will bring.