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Michael M. Bowden
Roger Williams University School of Law

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January 18, 2019

Law School News

Are You Experienced?

At 25, RWU Law is doing more than ever to ensure its students know how to think like lawyers, act like lawyers – and do good while doing well.



Experiential education is an integral part of RWU Law's academic culture.
Image Credit: Peter Silvia/RWU Law

January 18, 2019 Michael M. Bowden

As Rhode Island's only law school, RWU Law is uniquely positioned to offer its students broad educational options, deep experiential opportunities, and unparalleled access to the region's legal, business, nonprofit and government communities – ensuring that they graduate with the tools they need to change their world.

At Roger Williams Law, experiential education is a priority. That's why every student is guaranteed at least one substantial clinical experience (85 percent take advantage; 65 percent complete two or more). And expansion of the school's experiential opportunities over the past 25 years has been extraordinary.

“I’m very proud of the ways in which our experiential programs have developed,” says Professor Andrew Horwitz, Assistant Dean for Experiential Education. “We’ve been deliberate and thoughtful in the way we’ve developed our programs, and in the rigor with which we’ve monitored how well they work for our students. We’ve made experiential education and readiness to practice very much an integral part of what it means to graduate from RWU Law.”

Clinical Programs

By the time the school’s first class reached its 3L year in 1996, there were two clinics up and running. Today there are four: the Business Start-up Clinic, the Criminal Defense Clinic, the Immigration Clinic, and the Veterans Disability Appeals Field Clinic. Three are based at Roger Williams' dynamic new experiential campus in downtown Providence (the Veterans Clinic is located a few blocks away in the offices of Chisholm, Chisholm & Kilpatrick, one of the nation’s leading veterans disability law firms). All are focused on delivering what Horwitz terms “true clinical depth.”

“Many law schools today use the word ‘clinic’ very loosely,” he explains. “That can make it confusing for prospective students who are trying to comparison shop. In the field, however, ‘clinic’ is a term of art referring to a program with a full-time faculty member who is the licensed attorney of record for all the program’s cases, and whose only job is to run that program. And that’s what we mean by ‘clinic’ at RWU Law. Our clinics are run by professional educators who have as their one and only mission the education of the law student. That creates a very different dynamic from a program run by somebody who’s perhaps being pulled in different directions, teaching other classes, practicing law on the side. There are a lot of schools out there offering what they call ‘clinics’ for many fewer credits and with much less intense supervision.”

Roger Williams, by contrast, offers its three in-house clinics only at a credit load of eight credits, meaning they account for half of a student’s academic load in a semester.

“That allows us to assign a fair volume of work,” Horwitz says. “Part of the learning experience comes from volume and repetition: if you interview two clients, that’s a different experience than when you interview five or six. So obviously you’re going to progress faster and farther and learn more, aided by self-reflection, evaluation and feedback, all of which are very much part of the learning process.”

Externship Programs

In addition to developing its clinical programs, Roger Williams Law has also expanded its externship offerings in powerful ways.

Just a decade ago, there were only two such options: the Judicial Externship Program and the Public Interest Externship Program. Today, they have been joined by the Corporate Counsel Externship Program, the Environmental & Land Use Law Externship Program, the D.C. Semester-in-Practice Program and the New York Pro Bono Scholars Program.

“We haven’t only expanded in terms of breadth with all these programs,” says Laurie Barron, director of RWU Law’s Feinstein Center for Pro Bono & Experiential Education. “We’ve also expanded in terms of the number of credit hours students can earn. Where they could once work only two days a week in an externship program, students can now choose to work two, three, four or five days a week.”

“That’s why we call them *clinical* externship programs,” Horwitz notes. “Because they remain true to our emphasis on clinical depth.”

The Semester-in-Practice, in particular, has become a popular option because it enables students to earn academic credit while training full-time (locally or anywhere in the U.S. or abroad) in a government, nonprofit or judicial setting, under the supervision of attorneys or judges.

“It’s a five-day-a-week, full-time immersion experience that allows the student to go much deeper in terms of the work they’re involved with at the placement site, while still participating in a classroom component remotely,” Horwitz says. “It opens up all kinds of doors and works especially well for out-of-state students who want to return home and spend the last semester of law school in their home community. So they’re still enrolled in school and advancing academically, but they’re also networking and fostering employment opportunities in the place where they want to wind up.”

Pro Bono Programs

RWU Law’s Pro Bono Experiential Learning Requirement means that every student must provide at least 50 hours of pro bono legal service – law-related volunteer work for neither compensation nor credit – prior to graduation, a requirement that only a handful of law schools can match.

In 2009, the requirement was raised to 50 hours from the 20-hour requirement set in 1997, and one of the biggest qualitative changes since the shift has involved bringing the organization and “scaffolding” of this work in-house through the Pro Bono Collaborative (PBC) program.

“Of the schools that require pro bono as a graduation requirement, there’s no one else doing anything like us in terms of cutting-edge pro bono programs,” says Suzanne Harrington-Steppen, associate director of Pro Bono Programs. “And a large part of that is because our students are completing the requirement through school-facilitated projects.”

Examples range from the burgeoning popularity of Alternative Spring Break to such eye-opening opportunities as the Adult Correctional Institution Medium Security Facility Civil Legal Clinic Project, in which law students provide inmates with advice and counsel on civil legal issues.

“In essence, we’ve gone from simply matching students up with organizations, to developing and managing our own projects,” Harrington-Steppen says. “More than half of our students now fulfill their pro bono requirements through a project that we have directly facilitated. That transition first happened five years ago, and every year since then we’ve had a greater number of students join these well-facilitated, well-structured, very *intentional*/PBC projects – meaning that

students receive consistently high-quality training while also gaining an understanding of *why* the work is considered pro bono.”

“The goal is twofold,” Barron notes, “We want students to provide as much service as possible while they are in law school, but also to really instill in them a pro bono ethic – trying to maximize the likelihood that they will continue to see providing pro bono legal services as part of their professional responsibility.”

In the process, RWU Law has successfully brought pro bono service into the realm of experiential learning.

“Many schools still think of pro bono as being strictly a community service opportunity,” says Harrington-Steppen. “But at Roger Williams, we have always seen it as another way for our students to get really great hands-on learning experiences while also doing good. That’s why we’ve tightened up our training and supervision, while also trying to keep it much more flexible than a credit-bearing clinic.”

“We really do view pro bono as part of RWU Law’s experiential educational program,” Barron adds. “So many schools don’t place it on that continuum – but it *is* experiential in nature; there’s training involved, there’s journaling, there are ethical requirements, there’s reflection at the end.”

Notes RWU Law Dean Michael Yelnosky, “I like to say that at RWU Law we teach students not only ‘how to think like lawyers’ (the traditional explanation of what law schools do), but also how to act like lawyers. Students benefit from this approach because – through their experience in clinics, externships and pro bono projects – they begin to develop lawyering skills as well as their own professional identity. We are proud of our approach because in most instances, our students are, at the same time, providing legal assistance to individuals and organizations that cannot afford legal representation in the open market. It is a cliché, but it is hard not to think of this approach as ‘win-win.’”