

Building Multi-Disciplinary Student Teams to Serve Entrepreneurs in a Clinical Setting

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Many universities have established business plan competitions. More recently, a number of schools have instituted social entrepreneurship competitions that are similar, but focused on building non-profits, sustainable businesses, or other social justice oriented ventures. However, all of these programs focus mainly on teaching students how to *be* entrepreneurs. Equally important are programs to teach professional school students how to *serve* entrepreneurs.

Professional school clinics train students how to serve clients, but they have mainly been located in law schools and medical schools. In the law school environment, clinics traditionally focused on providing criminal or civil dispute resolution services to indigent clients. Over time, other clinics emerged, such as public policy clinics to help advance social causes and small business clinics to work with micro-enterprises in poor neighborhoods. These small business clinics could neither train students how to work on more sophisticated issues than the normal microenterprise encounters, nor serve middle class entrepreneurs who increasingly cannot afford the sorts of legal and business consulting services they need to properly launch their businesses. More recently some law schools have launched clinics that serve a broader range of entrepreneurs and/or nonprofit organizations. However, even these clinics utilize only law students.

I designed and launched the University of Washington's [Entrepreneurial Law Clinic](#) (ELC) in 2006 to address three significant unmet needs:

1. Create an experiential learning vehicle that would model the sophisticated multi-disciplinary transactional professional services environment that law and business students will actually work in after graduation. When counseling clients on legal and business strategies, or working to execute deals, professional service providers work with other service providers on the same team. For example, lawyers must be good at project management not only to coordinate the team of legal specialists needed to do the deal, but also to working with accountants, investment bankers, and other business consultants assisting the same client. The ELC's project teams match three law students (with each focused on one specialty area of business law, intellectual property, or tax) with one or two MBA students (focused either on general business consulting or a specialty area such as marketing, operations, or accounting/finance) to provide a comprehensive legal and business audit to the client entrepreneur. This audit serves as a roadmap to the issues the client faces both now and in the coming years.
2. Serve not only low-income entrepreneurs, but also middle income technology entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs, and university technology spin-offs. Studies have shown that access to affordable civil legal services is a problem even for middle class individuals. At the same time, technology entrepreneurs require

expensive legal specialties such as securities law and IP to properly launch their ventures. Accordingly, many entrepreneurs forego critical counseling that could prevent costly mistakes, including those that can result in loss of the company's valuable IP. Much current social entrepreneurship also involves technology and requires sophisticated counsel, with the added wrinkle that if the venture seeks to establish itself as a non-profit, it will need specialized counsel just to properly incorporate and seek tax exempt status with tax authorities. Finally, as universities endeavor to play a larger role in regional economic development by spinning off new technology into start-up companies, they also need access to low or no cost legal and business counseling to help their researchers and tech transfer offices research and implement commercialization options. ELC serves each of these client areas through both its audit process and specific transactional services and representation before government agencies such as the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and Internal Revenue Service.

3. Provide high quality, targeted *pro bono* opportunities for lawyers and business consultants. As evidenced by the Taproot Foundation's efforts to foster *pro bono* services in fields other than law and medicine (where the *pro bono* ethic is already established), there is much to do to develop the *pro bono* ethic in business consulting. Yet, even within the law, given the nature of traditional *pro bono* projects, many specialized attorneys such as those in securities law, IP, and tax have a difficult time finding projects suiting to their expertise and interests. ELC screens clients, organizes student teams who will do most of the work, and provides a nonprofit institutional framework to administer it all. This ensures that professionals can step into a controlled environment that allows them to volunteer the amount of time involvement they can afford, on projects tailored to their expertise, and in an institutional setting that qualifies to meet the *pro bono* standards of different professional organizations.

The benefits of ELC have been manifold. We have already helped many local businesses, nonprofits, and UW technology spin-offs in the few years we have been in operation (approximately 30 clients a year). We have trained a large number of students (approximately 20 law and 10 MBA students per year), some of whom now are *pro bono* supervisors in the Clinic, and one who actually launched his own social entrepreneurship venture after graduation and became a client of the Clinic. And we have developed a large network of active lawyer and business consultant volunteers, many of whom had never done any *pro bono* projects before working with us. The goodwill we have generated in the community, including both the public and private sectors, has been substantial. Through the *pro bono* supervisor model we have also given our alumni and others a truly meaningful way to give back to a public institution that does not involve simply writing a check to the university.

I would encourage professional schools to work together, and with their tech transfer offices, to develop similar programs. Other schools have already begun replicating our model, and I have advised many of them on what worked—and what didn't—for us. Please contact me at soconnor@uw.edu if you would like to discuss programs for your school.

