

[Law school experience in clinics translates to jobs even more than expected](#)

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By Don J. DeBenedictis

Vickie O. Brett and Amanda N. Selogie attribute part of their success in launching their own firm to taking a clinical class at Whittier Law School. Clinical courses have been multiplying steadily at most law schools for several years.

Right after law school, Amanda N. Selogie and Vickie O. Brett became associates in small firms. A couple of years later, they launched their own small but successful partnership in Huntington Beach.

They say they couldn't have done it without the clinical class they took Whittier Law School.

Colin T. Murphy credits his spot as a first-year associate at Haight Brown & Bonesteel LLP in San Francisco in part to his work in a clinic at Santa Clara University School of Law.

Even though Bradley A. Chapin's clinical experience at USC Gould School of Law had nothing to do with his eventual area of practice, he says it helped him get in the door at Rutan & Tucker LLP, where he now is the partner in charge of recruiting law students.

Clinical courses, in which students take on real clients with real legal problems under the close supervision of professors, have been multiplying significantly at most law schools for several years. They are expected to expand even more under new rules from the American Bar Association and proposed rules from the State Bar that demand students receive more "practical" training in how to be lawyers.

Although schools worry about the costs of adding clinics, which can be much more expensive than large lecture classes, professors, students, young lawyers and law firm partners see growth in clinics as a good thing.

"If you participate in a clinic, you get added benefits" beyond those from other classes, said Sandee W. Magliozzi, the associate dean for experiential learning at Santa Clara law school.

For some, the benefit is direct and obvious. Selogie and Brett participated in a clinic on special education law, then worked for firms in that practice, and in August they launched their firm helping parents obtain extra educational services from school districts.

Housed in a home office, their firm turned a profit after six months, they said.

The clinic "gave us valuable ... in-depth experience working with clients," Brett said.

Although the clinical program included a classroom component, "it was the [work in the] clinic that really showed us the practical side," Selogie said. "By the time I left, I'd had 100 clients."

For many others, the benefit goes beyond the nuts-and-bolts of the clinic's activity. Chapin is a business litigator at Rutan, while as a law student, he participated in USC's post-conviction clinic working on criminal appeals and habeas corpus petitions.

"That experience was extremely important as I was applying to law firms," he said. A few interviewers asked him if perhaps he didn't really want to do criminal law but he told them no. The clinic "gave me real-world experience," he said. "I'm really glad I did it."

He acknowledged his situation was atypical. He worked in the clinic in the summer after his first year in school - before he interviewed with law firms at the start of his second year. Most students aiming for firms Rutan's size or larger only begin taking clinical or other "experiential learning" classes after they've interviewed for jobs at firms.

Large firms, including Rutan, interview students to be summer associates at the start of their second years and offer jobs as associates to candidates who do well in the summer.

"None of the students have actually done clinics" when they take the first step toward big firm life, Chapin said.

That's a problem for law school proponents of clinics. Despite what leaders of large firms might say, they really aren't that interested in potential employees' clinical experience, according to some observers.

"We have many firms who are hiring using the old criteria," such as class standing and law school reputation, Magliozzi said. "They haven't changed their hiring practices."

Large corporate firms these days will mention clinical experience in their young lawyers' biography webpages "to persuade their clients they should pay for first- and second-year associates," said Ohio State University law professor Deborah Jones Merritt, who has looked at the issue. But many "don't care that much about experiential learning," she said.

When Chapin is hiring summer associates, "clinical is certainly a dynamic that's very helpful," he said. "By itself, it's not going to make or break" a candidate's chances.

For other practice settings, clinics are much more important both in getting jobs and doing well in them. Statistics from the American Bar Foundation's landmark *After the JD* study prove as much.

About 60 percent of young lawyers in firms with 250 or more lawyers rated clinical experience as helpful in the transition to practice. Among solo practitioners, 76 percent rated it helpful, while 72 percent did among those in firms with 20 or fewer lawyers.

Lawyers not in private firms liked it even more: 80 percent for government lawyers and 86 percent of those in public interest.

In some areas, direct clinical or externship experience with the preferred employer is all but mandatory to be hired after graduation. That's certainly the case in Ohio for those wanting to be prosecutors or public defenders, according to Merritt.

Professors and graduates said clinics' greatest value isn't providing legal or procedural knowledge in specific fields. It's in developing what Magliozzi and others call "soft skills," such as negotiating, teamwork, leadership, counseling and dealing with clients and opposing counsel.

Those skills involve "a lot of interpersonal relations," explained Melissa C. Brown, a lawyering skills professor at McGeorge School of Law. "We're not just suits. We work with other professionals, we work collaboratively."

Selogie and Brett learned special education law while in Whittier's clinic. At least as important was direct interaction with clients and other lawyers.

"It allowed us to break the ice in client relationships," Selogie said. "We were prepared with how to deal with clients and how to present ourselves as lawyers."

Murphy said he learned "how to really reach out and understand your client" when he represented poor people with employment problems in Santa Clara's clinic. His commitment to his clients paid off when he had to postpone his second interview at Haight Brown for an appearance.

The partner who hired him to defend professional liability litigation said "it made him know my head was in the right place," Murphy said.

Those soft skills easily transfer from clinical experience in one area to practice in others, unlike knowledge from substantive law school classes, said Margaret Reuter, a law professor at Indiana University who with a colleague dug deep into a pair of surveys on lawyers' attitudes about their experiential learning courses. No matter what area of law or practice setting they worked in, the 2,000 survey respondents rated their clinics, externships and simulation classes highly.

Lawyers in transactional practices had taken the fewest clinics, and they valued their clinics somewhat less than other lawyers, Reuter found. Even they rated their clinics at about 3.2 on a 4-point scale, compared to 3.8 from public service lawyers.

Law schools are adding more clinics in transactional areas of practice, such as corporate formation, negotiation and business advice. Reuter said, although the percentage of those clinics has remained flat over the last few years.

Still, students who have participated in them say they're worthwhile.

New UC Irvine School of Law graduate Kelly L. Galligan will join Rutan & Tucker's corporate group once she passes the July bar exam. She participated in UCI's community and economic development clinic this past year.

"It's the coolest experience," she said about working with small businesses as they incorporate and establish boards and bylaws. "It helps you realize that you're a lot more competent than you think."

She also got on-the-job training as a summer associate and clerk with Rutan prior to and while in the clinic.

At the firm, she and her peers work on "small tasks, and you don't know where they fit." In the clinic, "you jump right in and get your feet wet," she said.

"To be honest, I think the clinic work was more valuable."

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