

UNLV legal clinic meets unmet needs

Students get real-world experience, opportunity to play role in community

BY SARA CURETON

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas William S. Boyd School of Law has firmly seated itself among the most reputable graduate programs in the nation. Part of that reputation is thanks to the clinical education approach to instruction.

In 2000, the on-campus Thomas and Mack Legal Clinic began taking pro bono cases and giving students full control. It has proven to be a successful accompaniment to the students' education. Today, there are five clinics servicing the community in areas such as juvenile justice, immigration, criminal appellate, capital defense and child welfare.

Under the Nevada Supreme Court Student Practice Rule 49.5, limited practice is granted to law students under close supervision of licensed faculty. Professor Kate Kruse oversees a maximum of six students per clinic. The low student-to-teacher ratio helps the student receive the best specialized instruction possible.



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Third-year law student Chris Stein studies in the Thomas and Mack Legal Clinic library located inside the William S. Boyd Hall on the University of Las Vegas campus .

"If we are just up in our offices and teaching our classes, we wouldn't be able to give the students this hands-on experience," Kruse said. "It helps us make connections and allows us to bring our expertise into the community."

While students in the clinic face a much smaller case-load than a typical lawyer would carry, they are representing the clients on their own.

"Even in this unrealistic setting, the clinic's students have direct responsibility," said Professor David Thronson, who leads the immigration clinic.

The multi-disciplinary clinic hosts graduate students of the law school as well as those studying educational psychology and social work. This provides the clients with a more holistic approach to their representation.

The approach of clinical teaching is one that Kruse and Thronson both support.

"I really believe that it's a necessary component of legal education," Kruse said. "We're the only profession where hands-on field work isn't required."

"I think it's also very successful for our clients," Thronson said. "There aren't a lot of free services available and they are getting good representation."

Students practicing within the five legal clinics may provide representation to those that may otherwise go unrepresented.

"We set up our clinics to serve niches in the legal system where there may be gaps," Thronson said.

Kruse said the only setback is maintaining a small number of cases to serve the educational objective.

"We don't take as many cases as we would if our only objective was to serve the community."

Han Lee, in his third year of study at the Boyd School of Law, has taken on six cases within Thronson's clinic.

"It's been extremely busy but very rewarding," Lee said. He appreciates the guidance he gets from his professors in areas such as interviewing and other client relations.

"I'm getting valuable experience working with clients," he said. "You just don't learn that from the textbook."

Both Kruse and Thronson hope the experiences and opportunities presented in the Thomas and Mack Legal Clinic will leave a lasting impression among their students that will last far beyond graduation day. Kruse is an advocate for continued pro-bono work.

"We hope our students will leave law school with an awareness that there are a lot of unmet legal needs out there," he said.

Thronson looks forward to working with successful students in the future, and welcomes their help after their education is complete.

"We hope they will continue to view the law school as a resource to build their own practices," Thronson said.

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