

Rethinking Legal Clinics as Economic Infrastructure

A transactional law clinic at Penn State Dickinson Law may point toward a different model of legal education. Its Entrepreneur Assistance Clinic suggests that law school clinics can do more than train students: they can also expand access to legal services for small businesses and startups at meaningful scale.

BY FATIMEH D. PAHLAVAN

Most transactional law clinics serve a few dozen clients each year. That scale reflects a familiar model: one student, one matter, close supervision, intensive learning. Within that frame, volume is not the point. But some clinics are quietly testing different premises.

In 2022-23, Penn State Law's Entrepreneur Assistance Clinic reported providing legal assistance to more than 1,400 small business clients across 64 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. Even allowing for variation in what "assistance" means, that number is striking. It suggests something beyond a high-performing clinic. It suggests a clinic designed to function as part of an economic system.

Transactional clinics sit at a useful intersection. Students work on real matters for real clients, typically early-stage companies and non-profits, under attorney supervision. The work is practical: forming entities, reviewing founder arrangements, drafting basic contracts, and advising on compliance. For students, it is practice training. For clients, it is often the first meaningful legal guidance they can access.

What makes the Penn State model especially interesting is not only output but placement. The clinic is embedded in the Invent Penn State LaunchBox and Innovation Network, with referrals reportedly coming from dozens of economic-development organizations across the state. That structure matters. It means the clinic is not waiting for clients to find it. It is integrated into the places where entrepreneurs already go for help.

This raises the question worth studying: How do you increase access without diluting the educational experience or compromising service quality?

Three Levers for Responsible Scaling

Penn State has not publicly laid out its full operating model. Still, a few levers are visible, and they are the same levers that determine whether any clinic can scale responsibly.

Repeatable Matter Types. A large share of early-stage legal work is patterned. Examples include entity formation, basic governance documents, nondisclosure agreements (NDAs), standard contractor agreements, and early commercial contracts. Patterned does not mean trivial. It means the work can be organized into teachable modules with clear quality gates.

Tight Process Design. High-volume service does not happen through willpower. It happens through intake systems that triage quickly, checklists that prevent predictable errors, templates that reduce reinvention, and supervisory



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workflows that allocate attorney time to tasks for which judgment matters most.

Tools that Reduce the Blank-Page Burden. This is where emerging technology becomes relevant, but only if it is approached as scaffolding, not substitution. A student who has never drafted an agreement might stall not from lack of effort but from uncertainty about how to begin. A structured template, an issue outline, or a drafting “starter frame” can get the student into motion. With supervision, the learning happens in the refinement.

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) may play a role in that scaffolding. It is easy to overclaim. It is also hard to ignore the directional reality: tools that help students produce a workable first pass, bring issues to the surface, and ask better questions can shorten the time from confusion to competence. The policy challenge is to design guardrails that keep clients protected, preserve

confidentiality, and maintain accountability for legal judgment.

Legal Clinics as Economic Infrastructure

If clinics can responsibly combine referral networks, repeatable matter types, disciplined process, and well-governed tools, the implications are larger than pedagogy.

Clinics are not only teaching labs. They can function as economic infrastructure.

In regions where legal access is thin, a clinic may be the only place a founder can get early guidance. That guidance has downstream effects: whether a business forms correctly, whether ownership is documented cleanly, whether a founder avoids preventable disputes, whether a startup can be funded, whether a local enterprise survives its first fragile years. At scale, this is not only educational value. It is ecosystem support.

This framing also clarifies the policy questions law schools should be asking.

What would it look like to treat a transactional clinic as a public-facing access pipeline, not a boutique learning experience? What staffing model supports the pipeline model without burning out supervisors? Which services should be standardized, and which should remain bespoke? What partnerships expand reach while preserving client protection? How do we ensure that scale improves equity rather than reproducing the same gaps under a new banner?

The shift from intensive service for a few to meaningful access for many does not require lowering standards. It requires changing the frame.

If the goal is to educate practice-ready lawyers and strengthen the communities they will serve, transactional clinics are one of the most leveraged places to start. The question is whether we are ready to design them that way. **WL**

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