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9 Strategies for Improving the Legal Internship Experience at Your Office

Nicole P. Dyszlewski and Laura A. Pickering

At Roger Williams University School of Law there is a strong commitment to experiential education. In addition to the Feinstein Center for Pro Bono & Experiential Education, RWU Law engages students in experiential education through in-house clinics, clinical externships, and field clinics. In fact, not only are all students required to complete 50 hours of pro bono legal service in order to graduate, but the school has a guarantee that qualified students can receive a substantial clinical experience during their three years. This commitment to experiential education would be hard, if not impossible, to maintain without the support of the Rhode Island bench and bar. As stated in the Alliance for Experiential Learning in Law's *Report of the Working Group on Integration with the Profession*, "As experiential learning becomes an increasingly critical component of legal education, collaboration with practitioners also becomes increasingly critical....Through strategic, purposeful collaboration with practicing lawyers, schools can increase their ability to provide students with relevant, authentic, and substantive learning opportunities that have greater potential to increase the depth of their understanding, give them a working knowledge of how concepts apply in practice, and improve their ability to practice law upon graduation." Given how critical collaboration with members of the Rhode Island bar is for the future success of law students and the profession, the goal of this article is to share practical information on supervising law students or recent graduates.

Written by members of the Roger Williams University School of Law community, Nicole Dyszlewski, Research/Access Services Librarian, and Laura Pickering, 3L, this article aims to be a helpful tool for those members of the Rhode Island Bar currently working with interns, externs, clerks, or recent graduates, or those members who might be considering supervisory responsibilities for placements in the near future. This article is written as a series of practical tips for attorneys with supervisory responsibilities. These tips have been compiled from interviews with externship supervisors, interviews with RWU Law staff, interviews with current law students with previous clinical experience, and a review of current literature on experiential education. This article was inspired by the authors' experiences being a legal intern (Laura) and helping law students work through legal research questions while wrestling with the expectations of their placement supervisors (Nicole).

Introduce Your Interns

One way to support a law student's entry into the profession is by introducing her to lawyers, judges, mediators, clerks, and other legal professionals you encounter. According to Donna Gerson's *Building Career Connections: Networking Tools for Law Students and New Lawyers*, "networking is the means by which most law students will find employment, particularly full-time employment following graduation.... Most law students find jobs either through networking or self-initiated contact with prospective employers, often a combination of the two." Veronica Paricio, Assistant Dean for Career Development at Roger Williams University School of Law explains, "Students are encouraged to get to know as many attorneys as they can throughout an experience. This is not only to expand their network, but also to see that even attorneys in the same organization may have different writing styles, research preferences, or trial techniques. No two attorneys are alike and students need to adapt their work product to each supervisor they report to. It is a skill they will be using throughout the rest of their career. In addition, the more attorneys who are familiar with a student's work, the better positioned that student will be to utilize these attorneys as references or

for referrals to other employers.” Even introducing your intern to non-attorney staff in the firm or organization can prove helpful by making the intern feel more comfortable in her new surroundings. One student we interviewed stated, “The environment within a busy law firm may at times appear cold or unfriendly. I recall that although this appearance of coldness was not intentional, but rather the mere nature of a firm that advocates zealously for its clients, I felt as if I were forgotten.” Making your intern feel included in the organization and the profession by remembering to introduce her to others is a small, supportive gesture that can make a real difference.

Treat Law Students Like Law Students

In addition to law students, some placements also accept undergraduate students. Some of the students we interviewed suggested that in situations where law students and undergraduates work together that supervisors should acknowledge their differences in legal knowledge and make accommodations accordingly. For example, one student commented that it would be “very beneficial to conduct specific orientations for the law students about things like professionalism in the workplace, communication with clients, and goal-setting. Law students and undergraduate interns will likely have very different expectations and perspectives about the job placement and tailoring a program to law students will help to improve their experience.” Another student commented that if practical, it may even be helpful to separate 1L legal interns from 3L legal interns. While separate programs for law students and undergraduate students may not be feasible or desirable in all placements, supervisors should consider the unique and varying skills of their interns.

Develop Written Procedures

If your office does not already have written procedures for placements, consider developing them. Some of the law students interviewed suggested that it would be helpful for placements to provide new interns with written office procedures. Likely, some office procedures are already documented, but providing the guidance in a concise document may save an intern time and increase her familiarity with the ethos of the worksite. Linda Tappa, 3L, commented, “it’s amazing how much a quick introduction can help a student quickly orient herself in an environment that’s very foreign and slightly intimidating at first.” The orientation procedures at each placement are different, but providing written procedures to which an intern can refer after the excitement of the first few days has passed can be helpful. Professor Andrew Horwitz, Assistant Dean for Experiential Education at Roger Williams University School of Law explains, “Each of our clinical programs has developed an office manual that lays out procedures, policies, and expectations as clearly as we can. We modify these manuals annually based on student feedback and input. Our students universally say that they appreciate the guidance that these manuals offer.” In fact, one student we interviewed praised her placement for having given her access to work that had been completed by a previous intern as this helped reduce her learning curve and avoid feeling like she was reinventing the wheel. Similarly, one way to figure out what your next intern needs to know would be to ask your current intern. Ask your intern to share a short list of tips or hints on office procedures or other topics that she would have found useful in the placement.

Set Expectations

One of the most critical skills for supervisors of law students is being able to set clear expectations. Jeannine Casselman, Program Manager at Medical Legal Partnership Boston states:

“I have supervised over a dozen students ...and the most common placement problems arise when the supervisor and student have not clearly articulated to each other their personal goals and expectations of the other. For example, my particular

program has unique elements not commonly found in public interest organizations. My office is situated within a hospital, my referrals come from physicians and social workers, and the goal of the work is to address the legal needs that adversely impact health. The scope of the work requires the student to be open minded about this practice form and flexible given the place of work and target population. To avoid a misunderstanding about the program and the role the intern plays in the program I meet with students before placement decisions have been finalized to provide a detailed overview of the program's mission and my expectations of the potential intern. In most cases, students have agreed to continue with the placement process, but in some cases, this discussion has resulted with the student choosing an alternative placement. As the director of a small program, I want to maximize the efficiency of my services and that does mean a careful screening of my interns and I encourage potential applicants to engage in the same thoughtful exploration before choosing an internship so as to avoid failed expectations.”

While setting overarching goals and expectations is important, so is setting short term expectations or checkpoints. One third-year law student stated that in her placement she felt like there were overall clear expectations, “but not clear day-to-day expectations, or actionable goals to get to the end of the expectations.” Several law students stated that when supervisors were transparent about their expectations and gave them examples to work from it was much easier to understand and meet expectations. Providing examples of previous work done by the firm or sample documents for the law student to review, may help students more fully understand the assignments and supervisor expectations. One third-year law student praised his placement supervisor’s ability to set clear expectations by remarking, “These clear expectations were effectuated when supervising attorneys sat down to discuss assignments with me and referred me to possible sources of guidance and authority. Moreover, supervising attorneys have made their expectations clear by referring to some of my prior work and drawing similarities and distinctions therefrom.” While setting clear expectations is an important task for supervisors, it is also the responsibility of students to ask questions and seek clarity. According to Laurie Barron, Director of the Feinstein Center for Pro Bono & Experiential Education, all students in the Clinical Externship Program are encouraged to figure out what they need to know in order to complete an assignment successfully and to ask for what they need before embarking on the task.

Communicate

As previously discussed, communication of clear expectations is critical to establishing an effective supervisory relationship. Communication between a supervisor and student, however, can be difficult. As noted by Liz Ryan Cole and Leah Wortham in *Learning from Practice*, supervisors often “forget how big the differences can be between a law student and an experienced attorney. . . . With practice, professional judgments become almost intuitive.” Similarly, Cole and Wortham point out that legal interns do not have the same professional knowledge or experience that the attorneys supervising them have and what may seem “obvious” to the supervisor actually requires more elucidation—students are not “mind readers.” Laurie Barron points out that students are often “afraid to ask questions because they want to be able to hit the ground running and are fearful of taking too much of the supervisor’s time.” She cautions that virtually all misunderstandings that occur in the work place between supervisors and students are a result of ineffective communication and unclear expectations. While students certainly have a role in facilitating effective communication, supervisors may preempt communication problems by establishing how and when to communicate (e.g., in-person, texting, email, phone) at the outset of the placement.

Assign Both Long Term & Short Term Assignments

When asked to name some of the most common issues with internship placements, Laurie Barron was quick to list workflow as one of the top concerns. Some students struggle with having too much work while others struggle with not having enough meaningful work to do. One way to prevent a potential workflow issue is to assign your intern both long-term and short-term projects. This insures that if the supervising attorney is out sick or busy with a pressing matter, the intern will still have work to do. Jeannine Casselman explains, “When I consider my externs I think about my internship experience I had while in law school and try to avoid those aspects of the internship that were poor, such as poor expectation setting by a supervisor and lack of work (I particularly hated being bored). I try to be sure that my externs/interns always have daily tasks as well as a long term project.” A legal research assignment is one type of long-term project that a law student can work on independently and start/stop as demanded by short-term tasks. A long-term research assignment can also provide an opportunity for the student to present the information to the supervisor, formally or informally, which can allow the student to grow and hone a different set of professional skills.

Explain Processes & Thinking

While students in legal placements are trying to complete legal tasks and improve their legal skills, they are also there to absorb as much information about being a professional lawyer as possible. When asked if there was anything that he wished to share about what lawyers and placement supervisors can do to help law students in a placement and/or help law students become more practice ready, one student we interviewed spoke about contextualism. He suggested that instead of a supervisor asking an intern to find a resource, that the supervisor instead explain the methodology of the case and what the supervisor intends to accomplish with the information prior to asking for the resource itself. Putting the request in context helped the student feel more comfortable with sharing his voice and reduced communication errors between the student and his supervisor. Similarly, Laurie Barron counsels supervisors to bring students into learning experiences that aren't necessarily as productive for the placement but which help teach context. While there are many concepts that can be mastered in a law school classroom, context and professionalism are uniquely suited to an experiential learning setting. Another student interviewed praised her placement, remarking, “My supervising attorneys spoke with me about their law school experiences, their previous positions, and certain habits and practices that they think are the most important. Those conversations about lawyering and advocacy were enlightening and touched on subjects that aren't necessarily covered in the classroom but that have a big impact in practice.” Michael Yelnosky, the dean of the law school and the director of the Judicial Clinical Externship Program explained that “we are quite fortunate to have supervisors in all of our externship programs who understand how to help create a meaningful learning experience for our students. Many of our externship supervisors have been doing this for years, and for new supervisors the staff of the Feinstein Center for Pro Bono and Experiential Education have developed a great system for ‘onboarding’ new supervisors.”

Recommend Research Resources

Legal interns are generally not familiar with the research resources that practicing attorneys use on a regular basis, such as CLE materials, subject-specific secondary sources, and popular treatises. If you have a favorite or trusted resource, share it with your student. She likely will have, or likely can obtain, access to it through the law library. In addition to topic-specific resources, some interns may not realize that they can use most digital subscription resources available to them as law students to complete assigned work in credit-bearing placements. Another resource available to law students are

law librarians. As author Kendall L. Kerew states in the Teacher's Manual to *Learning From Practice A Text For Experiential Legal Education* (3rd ed.):

“From my experience, the two biggest pitfalls students face in researching unfamiliar questions are... students want to jump right in and perform an electronic search on Westlaw or Lexis without consulting secondary sources or thinking through the best search terms to use. Similarly, students do not always keep track of the research they have done so they are less able to determine whether they have reached an appropriate stopping point.”

Both of these pitfalls can be ameliorated by having students contact their school's law librarians who are experts in legal research materials, familiar with the resources available to law students, and knowledgeable about developing comprehensive research strategies. Furthermore, some students may feel more comfortable approaching a law librarian about research questions because of the fear that a question is too rudimentary. Laurie Barron explains, “Students may be reluctant to ask questions because they want to take initiative and be able to figure the assignment out on their own.” Referring your intern to library staff within the placement or within the law school can allow the student to talk through a research question, discover resources, and gain confidence in the placement. Reminding students to use available research resources, whether those resources are a website or a person, is important. Reminding them to be mindful not to compromise confidentiality during a reference interaction with a law librarian is also critical.

Provide Regular & Meaningful Feedback

Regular and meaningful feedback is essential to maximizing an intern's practical learning experience. Many of the law students we interviewed wished that their placement supervisors had provided them with more helpful feedback on their work, including specific suggestions on how to improve on future assignments. A lack of meaningful feedback from a placement supervisor to the student can create a situation in which both student and supervisor are frustrated. From the student's perspective, inadequate feedback leaves the student in the dark—unsure of whether her performance was satisfactory and, if not, why. Alternatively, from the supervisor's perspective, if a student's performance is insufficient, it often becomes easier for the supervisor to fix the student's mistakes rather than deal with an upset or defensive intern. In *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen suggest that “much of the angst and frustration surrounding feedback is mismatch and differing perceptions between the giver and receiver of feedback.” In Laurie Barron's experience, some supervisors “are reluctant to give negative albeit constructive feedback because they want the experience to be positive for the student.” Students, however, desperately want and need feedback, “because it's the only way they can learn how to be a better lawyer.” Barron recommends that feedback to legal interns be “prompt, concrete, and detailed.” Supervisors should highlight what the student did well, where they need to improve, and provide recommendations on how they can be better in the future. Feedback should also be timely so that the assignment is still fresh in everyone's mind and to give the student time to improve their performance, assuming there is sufficient time and the opportunity. One student interviewed told us that her follow-up meetings with her supervisors regarding her completed assignments “were helpful guideposts for future tasks” and that the specific feedback she received during these meetings helped her to improve over the course of her placement. Barron adds that “the positive feedback should be just as detailed as the negative feedback.” She also advises supervisors to establish a system for giving and receiving feedback. By

investing time to give intern regular and meaningful feedback, supervisors can create a more productive and fulfilling experience for everyone.

Conclusion

Much of the burden of making a placement work falls to the student to bear. One interviewed student stated, “Students must go into legal job placements with the desire...necessary to prove their worth to their superiors. This requires students not only to accept—but to invite—challenging tasks...The most a lawyer or placement supervisor can do to help a law student become more practice ready is to sit down and discuss concepts with the student as if the student were the supervisor’s equal...The remaining burden lies with the student; he or she must demonstrate the work ethic necessary to gain a supervising lawyer’s trust.” If you are currently working with interns, these tips are helpful reminders of lessons you may have already learned through experience. However, if you are reading this and considering a new role as an internship supervisor, Laurie Barron counsels, “Think concretely about the ways a law student can help you and consider whether you have the time to devote to an intern.”

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