Clinics-in-Common: Creating Uncommon Professionals

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Most professional educational programs develop specialized experts who view problems from the perspectives of their own disciplines. Yet, our most pressing social problems are rarely limited to a single disciplinary approach. Instead of providing future professionals with the tools necessary for solving problems that cross disciplines, many professional training programs inadvertently stifle multidisciplinary communication and collaboration by isolating students from students in other disciplines. Practitioners are trained to manage societal problems rather than to solve them within varied communities. This article describes an innovative multidisciplinary clinic model based at the University of Hawai‘i’s William S. Richardson School of Law that focuses specifically on the needs of children who have entered or are at risk of entering the foster care system. It also discusses a medical–legal partnership within a community health center based on principles learned and experiences gained from this unique model.

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Law schools and other graduate programs are geared toward developing experts. We seek to inculcate our students with a particular body of vocabulary, knowledge, and skills. They are trained to consider problems from the perspective of their own particular discipline. Yet, complex social problems transcend disciplinary boundaries. Instead of helping to solve such problems, specialized professional training often makes communication and collaboration quite difficult, isolating practitioners from practitioners in other disciplines as well as from the particular community. Often, practitioners are trained to manage societal problems rather than to solve them. This article describes both the development of a unique clinic model and an exciting program that was subsequently organized by a student who took to heart the principles and experiences she encountered in an early version of the innovative Child Welfare Clinic (CWC).

In 2005, a small planning group at the University of Hawai‘i’s William S. Richardson School of Law began to envision and create what became an uncommon clinical course. Most law school clinical courses provide instruction in professional skills in a specific area of law, and many offer live-client and other practice experiences not available in a traditional law school classroom. The new multidisciplinary model focuses instead on a pressing societal issue: specifically, the needs of children in Hawai‘i who have entered or are at risk of entering the foster care system.
A MULTIDISCIPLINARY CLINIC MODEL

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Funded by federal grants through collaboration with the Hawai‘i Department of Human Services and with matching funds provided by the Hawai‘i Family Court and the Law School, the CWC brings together faculty and students from the University of Hawai‘i Schools of Education, Law, Nursing, and Social Work to think creatively and work collaboratively on community projects that improve the lives of foster children and children at risk in Hawai‘i. In the process, students are encouraged to view themselves as emerging professionals and to evaluate critically the role that their particular professional discipline plays within the complex realm of child welfare. Together, students and faculty members also work to envision innovative approaches to practice.

The relevance of such a problem-based clinical class is not limited to the area of child welfare. One can readily imagine similar multidisciplinary classes focused on a variety of complex societal issues ranging from indigent mental health care, for example, to climate change. A brief description of the main characteristics of our CWC, as well as one example of the kinds of forward-looking outcomes that may be triggered by it, could serve as a roadmap for similar efforts involving other professional schools.

Theoretical Framework

The CWC weaves together three theoretical strands: community engagement, multidisciplinarity, and collaboration. Perhaps the most important and unusual aspect of the clinic is its emphasis on community engagement. Over the course of the semester, multidisciplinary student teams partner with community organizations to develop practical, real-world projects. The community partner organizations work with the student teams to assess community needs, identify key stakeholders, and set goals that are achievable and likely to benefit the community organization and the people it serves. The explicit aim of any and all interactions with community partners is to provide the particular community organization with tangible benefits. When an organization agrees to work with one of our student teams, we make clear that this is an educational experience for our students; however, the agreement also includes the understanding that our student teams will be absolutely focused on the goal of providing a tangible benefit to the partner organization, and that any student team that does not achieve this goal fails to meet a key course requirement.

Conceiving projects and seeing them through to completion—especially given that the course is taught over a single semester—requires an enormous effort from the student teams. In addition, hard work alone does not guarantee positive results. Students learn that they must earn the trust of the partner organizations by listening carefully to their ideas and honoring their concerns. This often requires meeting the challenge of surrendering the role of professional superiority and appreciating the experience-based and hard-earned expertise of the community partners.

The second strand that runs through the course is multidisciplinarity. The course is team-taught by a group of six faculty members from the four participating schools. Faculty members introduce students to some of the basics about how each discipline uses its own distinct analytic lens to examine and resolve problems; thus, a lawyer may view an allegation of child neglect as a question of proof and due process, and the social worker may begin by considering the child’s safety, possible placement options for the child, and possible services for the parent. One formal set of professional ethics may demand confidentiality, whereas another requires disclosure in the same situation. The course provides students with an understanding of the role that each of the professions plays in the child welfare system and the different, and at times competing, ethical guidelines that seek to govern their behavior.

Although each of these analytical lenses is extremely useful, the course takes pains to point out how assumptions based on narrow disciplinary roles and perspectives can interfere with successfully serving the needs of clients. On the most basic level, this can be seen in the way the jargon of one discipline impedes communication with other professionals. More broadly, the needs of children and families involved with the child welfare system rarely reside within discrete disciplinary boundaries. When a lawyer fails to consider educational issues, or a social worker does not follow up on health concerns, the child often suffers. The course encourages students to think, not merely in terms of their
professional roles within the system, but also in terms of their responsibilities to the individuals and communities with which they interact.

The third key strand is collaboration. From the first day of class, faculty members intentionally model collaboration in their team-teaching and use exercises and activities to teach collaboration as a discrete professional skill. Students are assigned to teams to maximize the multidisciplinary make-up of each team. In addition to logistical challenges such as scheduling and transportation to the project site, students also must develop strategies for group decision making and conflict resolution. Students thus have to identify and work through their own strengths and weaknesses as team members. Team projects invariably require compromise and flexibility from all members of the team. The process of developing a productive collaboration among team members is often the aspect of the course that CWC students find most challenging and yet, ultimately, most rewarding.

Curricular Components

Community Organization Collaboration Project

As the CWC students do their clinical work in multidisciplinary teams and in collaboration with community partner organizations, they practice many of the skills and dispositions required for effective professional intervention, including needs assessment, creative problem solving, active listening, compromise, prioritization, tolerance, and perseverance. In contrast to the design of other law school clinics, students in the CWC do not work on active family court cases. One of the reasons for this is that the goal of this course is to invite students to develop novel ways of meeting child and community needs, as opposed to preparing them simply to play a role in the child welfare system as it is currently configured.

This turn away from traditional case-based training places a tremendous pedagogical burden on the quality of the collaboration experience involving the community organization. And this, in turn, requires the clinic to build strong relationships with solid organizations that are committed to providing our students with productive learning opportunities.

The CWC has partnered with a variety of community agencies, including those that work directly with mental health, medical, social, educational, and legal needs of foster children and children at risk and their families. For example, one organization with which we have built a strong relationship is the Farrington High School Teen Center. The Teen Center is a multidisciplinary resource and support center in one of Hawai‘i’s largest public high schools that has a predominantly low-income student population. One student team at the Teen Center developed a presentation for school staff on the topic of teen partner violence and contributed to proposals for school-wide policies addressing that difficult problem. They also built a resource bank for the Teen Center. During another year, a student team worked with the peer mediation program at the Teen Center to promote, publicize, and obtain resources for the mediation program. Another team’s project involved helping to create a “safe zone” for the LGBTQ students at the school.

An organization with which we have worked many times is Youth Outreach (YO), a program of the Waikīki Health Center. YO is a drop-in center for homeless and street-involved youth, located in the heart of busy Waikīki. YO offers programs and classes and has an onsite medical clinic. Student teams working at YO have spearheaded donation campaigns that raised awareness on the University of Hawai‘i campus and in the community about the issue of youth homelessness. Student teams also have arranged slam poetry workshops to promote self-expression and self-advocacy; in another year, they brought in street artists and helped to organize and oversee the painting of a large graffiti mural on the wall of the facility.

Perhaps the most important relationship that we have built on year after year is with the Kapi‘olani Child Protection Center (KCPC), which assists the Department of Human Services in identifying, preventing, and treating psychological and medical issues related to child abuse and neglect. Students in the CWC work with the KCPC staff, led by a psychologist, and with postdoctoral psychology fellows to focus on mental health issues of both parents and children in foster care. One of the most instructive activities for the students, for example, has been to attend and participate in multidisciplinary team meetings that bring together...
professionals involved in a specific child welfare case to recommend services and to provide direction to the Department of Human Services. In addition to student teams partnering with the KCPC on various community projects, the CWC collaborates with the KCPC each year in holding a formal mock trial regarding a fictive child welfare court case. CWC students, together with a team of psychology postdoctoral fellows and social work interns from the KCPC, participate in this experience. The mock trial experience is discussed in more depth below, but it is worth noting that the intense collaborative preparation for and execution of the mock trial provide new challenges and perspectives for the KCPC postdoctoral psychology fellows and social work interns as well as for the CWC students.

Case Studies

In addition to requiring CWC students to engage in a community organization collaboration project, the faculty assigns and discusses a wide variety of multidisciplinary reading materials that deal, for example, with vital protective factors and different approaches to developing resiliency in youth (with special emphasis on the Kaua‘i longitudinal study on resiliency); cultural misperceptions in establishing priorities for ensuring a child’s well-being and appropriate health care; techniques to collect information about a particular family using the ecomap and genogram, as well as a similar tool developed in Hawai‘i called the pohai kealoha (Wilcox, 1996); child brain development; and the treatment of trauma.

The in-class academic component of the course centers on three cases drawn from real life. Through discussion and analysis of these cases, students learn about child welfare law and the structure of the family court system and the process through which child welfare cases are adjudicated. These cases afford experience reading and interpreting authentic case files and court documents. The cases—with names and identifying information redacted—are chosen because their specific complexities and ambiguities are particularly likely to provoke multidisciplinary discussion about different aspects of child welfare practice. The cases also correspond to the way in which the focus of the course broadens from consideration of the individual child to the family and community and then to society as a whole.

The first two cases involve allegations of abuse and neglect of individual children. In the first case, an infant who suffers injuries while in her father’s care is placed in foster custody. This scenario invites discussion of a number of topics, including the adequacy of the proof of harm, the consequences for an allegedly nonprotective mother, and—because the father is in the military—the interaction of the family court and the military justice system. The second case involves a teenage girl in foster care who is herself pregnant and in danger of losing custody of her child. Discussion around this case explores the generational repercussions of abuse and neglect.

The third case involves a class action lawsuit on behalf of homeless students whose access to equal education has been impeded by the policies of the state Department of Education. This case introduces issues of compliance with federal and state statutory provisions and larger questions about poverty, inequity, and public responsibility. Ultimately, this final case provides an opportunity to wrap up the CWC course through discussion of the relative merits of different approaches to effecting change in society’s current approaches to child welfare.

Clinical Simulations

Another important feature of the CWC is that it provides students with a number of formal, in-class opportunities to learn and develop practical skills. For example, students practice interviewing a “minor” client role, played by an adult; they administer a variety of assessment tools; and they participate in a family group decision-making and mediation scenario. The two most significant exercises each year are probably the mock trial and the final team presentations.

As noted earlier, the mock trial exercise involves collaboration with the KCPC. Each year, the KCPC is an Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers site for postdoctoral fellows in clinical psychology and an internship site for master’s degree students in social work.

The mock trial is modeled on a real child welfare court proceeding. In preparation for the mock trial, CWC students are each assigned a
role. Some act as attorneys; some act as child welfare professionals; and some play roles as the parents, relatives, foster parents, and other people embroiled in the child welfare case. Psychology postdoctoral fellows and social work interns from the KCPC are also assigned roles. Child welfare attorneys and clinical professionals from the KCPC come to class and join the CWC faculty in coaching CWC students and the KCPC fellows and interns on the circumstances of the case and their roles at the mock trial. During this preparation phase, CWC students and the KCPC fellows and interns are trained about a variety of topics, including court procedure and etiquette, psychological diagnoses frequently attributed to the parties in child welfare cases, the dynamics of child abuse and neglect, and the use and misuse of psychological evaluations. At the mock trial itself, CWC students and the KCPC psychology fellows and social work interns are sworn in and placed on the witness stand. They provide expert testimony and are cross-examined on their qualifications and opinions by CWC students assigned legal advocacy roles. A Hawai‘i state judge with experience in child welfare practice presides over the exercise and provides students with immediate feedback on their performance.

This mock trial aspect of the CWC course is regularly described by our students as one of the most difficult and important experiences of the semester. The structure and formality of the courtroom atmosphere is eye opening, and the opportunity to interact and collaborate with the KCPC psychology fellows and social work interns—many of whom already have active caseloads and have been working in the field—provides our students with important perspectives and appreciation for the variety and complexity of the mental health challenges frequently faced by at-risk children and their families.

The last exercise we require of every CWC student is the final team project presentation. Final team presentations are intended to simulate a professional presentation before an institutional funder or a legislative body. Students are also encouraged to consider the sustainability of their projects. This exercise is intended to give students experience advocating for the preservation and support of projects on which they have worked. The teams must demonstrate how their projects have benefited their community partners and how they have met the goals of being collaborative, multidisciplinary, and community-based. Students are also encouraged to consider the rhetorical power of their presentations; over the years, final presentations have included multimedia elements including video, musical performances, poetry, and dance. A significant portion of the assessment for the course is based on the final presentation by each team about its community project.

Journaling

All students are required to keep a journal, and faculty members provide feedback to the students in response to the journal entries. This reflective process is important to the development of the student’s professional identity by offering an opportunity for self-reflection while also providing an opportunity for mentoring and modeling through the feedback process.

Because the CWC invites students to consider new multidisciplinary approaches to child welfare service, one of its goals is to help future practitioners build multidisciplinary skills and capacity. The journals have proven to be an important element of this developmental process. Through the self-reflective journaling process, students often begin to challenge their own assumptions regarding the strengths and limits of their chosen field or profession and they start to seek new ways of thinking about their work and about their roles.

Student Outcomes

The CWC is intended to benefit students primarily in three ways. First, students gain an understanding of the child welfare system in Hawai‘i, and they develop practical skills to enable them to operate effectively in this system, including the ability to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries. Second, students leave the course with an enhanced capacity to analyze the imperfections of the child welfare system and to identify avenues for improvement. This includes the ability to understand the specific limitations of their chosen professional disciplinary perspectives. Finally, and perhaps most important, students leave the class with a direct personal connection with other current and future professionals in a variety of disciplines.
Although it is too early to assess the long-term impact of the CWC on child welfare practice in Hawai‘i, students consistently report that the course was successful at preparing them for such work. Although specifically concerned with child welfare, the skills and attitudes fostered by the course are likely to influence the way students view many of the complex social issues that they will encounter in their future practices.

Other feedback from students suggests that the class is serving an additional important, if less tangible, purpose. Graduate education often isolates students from their communities; students report that the opportunity provided by the class to work on tangible projects with community partners was deeply important and meaningful to them. Students have described the class as “inspiring,” “pushing the envelope,” “intellectually stimulating,” “educationally expansive,” and “contributing to personal growth.” Students report that the class helped to connect them to the ideals that led them to pursue higher degrees in the first place. As one student put it, “This class is the reason I came to law school.”

Perhaps the most profound evidence that ideas and experiences gained through the CWC can take hold and make a difference in a student’s future (and even the future of a community) is that one student in an inaugural CWC went on to create her own multidisciplinary initiative that provides direct delivery of needed services to underserved communities, as well as a new and promising model for professional training. This initiative, called the Medical–Legal Partnership for Children in Hawai‘i (MLPC), uses a multidisciplinary approach to address the social determinants of health and applies the collaborative principle of the CWC course by drawing on lawyers, behavioral health professionals, nursing and medical staff, maternal and child health workers, and staff interpreters to address a wide range of client needs.

In partnership with the Kūkua Kalihi Valley Comprehensive Family Services, a federally qualified community health center, this project (a) provides direct legal advocacy for low-income children and families through a health center clinic, (b) trains health professionals about the legal aspects of problems faced by the families they serve, and (c) addresses systemic issues to improve the health and well-being of low-income families in Hawai‘i.

We are proud to see that one of our own CWC students applied the core principles of the course to launch a successful program in the community. MLPC is an exciting example of the kind of outcome that may emerge when students and faculty from different disciplinary backgrounds have the opportunity to participate in a dedicated multidisciplinary clinic experience that engages directly with critical social issues.

**Conclusion**

The students who have participated in these collaborative, multidisciplinary endeavors consistently indicate that they have been trained in challenging new ways and in ways that they believe will prove invaluable throughout their professional careers. The faculty members and professionals who put together these new models have seen exciting educational outcomes and are even more convinced that the future is bright for such multidisciplinary projects. In fact, many think that future hiring decisions for professionals are almost certain to seek just such collaborative educational backgrounds. It also seems clear that clients and patients benefit significantly from multidisciplinary sensitivity and from knowledgeable, cooperative approaches to the multifaceted problems they face every day.

One area that has been identified for future development is a more active incorporation of clinical psychology preprofessionals as students in the course. Currently, as described above, we work with postgraduate psychology fellows in key ways. This work has proven extremely beneficial to the CWC process. Unfortunately, although CWC faculty members have made efforts to attract psychology graduate students to enroll in the course, these efforts have not yet been successful. Nonetheless, the clinic’s valuable collaborative relationship with many KCPC psychology fellows has bolstered our interest in renewing efforts to attract clinical psychology graduate students, although we recognize that these students face very heavy schedules already.

In conclusion, we believe that future child welfare practitioners, as well as the at-risk child clients they will serve, will benefit significantly
from multidisciplinary clinic models that emphasize collaboration and partnerships that bolster disciplinary expertise. Such practitioners will possess the skills to address the needs of children from an integrated perspective, as opposed to seeing a child through only one disciplinary lens. Such practitioners, we believe, will possess the skills and disposition needed to plug the gaps in the child welfare system that at-risk children often face. Thus, we believe such practitioners will more efficiently, effectively, and compassionately serve all children—and particularly foster and at-risk children. These are ambitious beliefs. But we also believe that foster and at-risk children in Hawai‘i deserve courageous, forward-thinking advocates who are committed to finding new and better practical ways to assist them.

Reference


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