

The Free Law Firm at the University of Sonora, South Campus: Community Impact and Student Educational Experience.

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the impact and experience of the free legal office at the University of Sonora, South Campus, with the aim of understanding how this service contributes to the training of law students and how it is perceived by clients. Using a qualitative approach based on focus groups with clients and students, the results show that the office provides valuable legal assistance to people with limited resources, helping to solve complex legal problems and offering personalized treatment. Clients appreciate the accessibility of the service, while students highlight the practical experience and the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in real cases. Despite facing challenges such as time management and workload, the experience has been mostly positive and formative. The conclusions indicate that the office plays an essential role in the professional preparation of students and offers an important service to those who use it, underlining the need to continue strengthening this resource to maximize its positive impact on academic and professional training.

Keywords: Access to Justice, Legal Education, Real Cases

Introduction

The Law Office of the University of Sonora, particularly at its Navojoa Campus, has been a pillar in the training of law students and in the provision of legal services to the community since its creation. This office not only represents an institutional effort to link legal theory with practice, but also a concrete response to the needs of access to justice for vulnerable populations in the Navojoa region and its surroundings.

The firm began as part of an academic program designed to provide law students with direct practical experience. Its founding responded to the need to integrate academic learning with practical application, allowing students to face real cases under the supervision of experienced professors and legal professionals. Since its inception, the firm has evolved to adapt to the changing legal needs of the community and to developments in legal education. Over time, it has expanded its services to include legal advice and representation in various areas, such as civil, family and criminal law, among others.

The firm has played a crucial role in providing access to justice for many people who would otherwise not have the means to obtain legal representation. This social function of the firm reflects the commitment of the University of Sonora to social responsibility and community justice. Educationally, the firm has provided generations of law students with a unique window into the professional world, preparing them not only in technical legal skills but also in ethical and social aspects of legal practice. The practical experience acquired at the firm complements the academic training of students and better prepares them for their future careers. Challenges and adaptations: Over the years, the firm has faced challenges such as constantly updating its educational offerings and services in response to legal and social dynamics and growing demand from the community. The response to these challenges has included updating the curriculum and teaching methods and expanding its network of collaboration with legal institutions.

The Law Firm is a leading example of how educational institutions can significantly contribute to both the professional development of their students and the well-being of the community at large. Its history is a testament to the positive impact that applied education and social engagement can have on society.

In 1984, the vision was conceived of creating a legal laboratory for low-income society so that students could practice different ways of handling legal matters in a professional manner before the various courts.

The law firm is currently headed by Mr. Manuel Raymundo Valdez Domínguez, who is responsible for supervising and coordinating all legal activities of the firm. Under his direction, the firm offers a wide range of advisory and representation services in various areas of law. These areas include family law, where solutions are provided in cases of alimony, divorce, custody and other family-related issues; civil law, which covers issues such as contracts, civil liability and successions; and criminal law, where legal representation is offered to both victims and defendants in criminal cases.

Additionally, the firm has experience in agrarian law, providing assistance to ejidal community groups in matters related to land ownership and use; fiscal law, assisting with tax and fiscal issues; labor law, managing conflicts and advising on labor relations and employment contracts; and administrative law, where the relationship between citizens and government entities is handled. With a solid background and extensive experience in these areas, through the firm and its staff, it is ensured that each case receives the specialized attention and strategic approach necessary to achieve the best possible results.

Research Question:

How does the Free Legal Office of the University of Sonora Campus Navojoa impact access to justice and the professional training of law students in the region?

General Objective:

To analyze the impact of the Free Legal Office of the University of Sonora, Navojoa Campus, in improving access to justice for the local community and in developing practical skills for law students.

Specific Objective:

Evaluate how the Free Legal Office contributes to the resolution of legal problems in the community by training law graduates.

Justification:

The Free Legal Office of the University of Sonora, Navojoa Campus, plays a fundamental role in providing legal services to people with limited resources in the southern region of Sonora. This office not only offers free legal assistance to those who face economic difficulties in accessing legal services, but also serves as an educational platform for law students, providing them with valuable practical experience in professional practice.

In many communities, access to justice can be limited by economic barriers, especially for those who cannot afford the services of an attorney. The pro bono law firm acts as a crucial resource for these individuals, providing legal assistance in a variety of areas, such as family law, civil law, and criminal law. Evaluating the impact of this firm in resolving legal problems and improving access to justice is essential to understanding its contribution to equity and community well-being.

For law students, the law firm offers a unique opportunity to apply the theory learned in class to real-life situations. Practical experience in a professional setting allows them to develop critical skills such as developing legal strategies, communicating effectively with clients, and resolving conflicts. Analyzing how this experience contributes to students' professional development provides insight into the effectiveness of the law firm as an educational tool and preparation for legal practice.

Assessing the perceptions of law firm users and students about the quality and effectiveness of services is crucial to identifying areas for improvement and ensuring that the law firm meets its goals for both the community and future legal professionals. Feedback from these groups will help fine-tune and strengthen the law firm's operations, ensuring that it continues to be a valuable resource.

Research on the Free Legal Office of the University of Sonora, Campus Sur, is essential to understanding its impact on access to justice and on the training of students. The findings can inform improvements in the operation of the office and in the free legal services policy in the region, contributing to the strengthening of the justice system and the preparation of future lawyers.

Theoretical Framework

Access to Justice Theory

Access to justice theory is based on the principle that justice should be a universal right, not a privilege reserved for those who can afford it. This theory is essential to understanding how legal systems can and should be designed to serve the entire population equitably, regardless of their financial situation.

Foundations of the Theory of Access to Justice

The central premise of the access to justice theory is that the right to legal protection and the ability to resolve disputes fairly should not depend on a person's economic ability. According to this theory, justice should be accessible to all, which implies the need to remove economic, structural and social barriers that prevent individuals from exercising their legal rights and receiving fair treatment under the law.

In their seminal work *Access to Justice*, Reza Banakar and Marios Karagiannopoulos (2006) stress that justice should not only be administered impartially, but should also be accessible in practical terms to those facing economic hardship. The authors argue that access to justice is crucial to maintaining the legitimacy of the legal system and ensuring that all citizens can effectively defend their rights (Banakar & Karagiannopoulos, 2006).

Barriers to Access to Justice

One of the main problems identified in the access to justice theory is the existence of barriers that prevent low-income people from accessing legal services. These barriers can be economic, such as the high costs of legal fees, or structural, such as a lack of knowledge about legal rights and court procedures.

According to the UK Justice Commission report, *Access to Justice: A Review of the Current Situation* (2011), economic barriers include costs associated with hiring lawyers and lack of resources to pay court fees. Structural barriers, on the other hand, refer to a lack of information and guidance on how to navigate the legal system. The report suggests that these barriers contribute to inequality in access to justice and can lead to increased vulnerability for those who are already economically disadvantaged (Justice Commission, 2011).

Initiatives to Improve Access to Justice

To address these barriers, various initiatives have been implemented globally. One of the most common strategies is the establishment of free or low-cost legal services for low-income people. According to John Eekelaar's book *Legal Aid and Access to Justice* (2016), legal aid services provided by governmental and non-governmental organizations seek to reduce economic and structural barriers by offering legal representation to those who cannot afford it (Eekelaar, 2016).

Another important initiative is the promotion of legal education and information accessible to the public. Legal education can help people better understand their rights and how they can access available legal resources. In the context of universities, free law firms run by students under the supervision of professors offer a double advantage: they provide legal assistance to low-income people while providing practical experience to future lawyers.

Experiential Learning Model: Application in Free Law Firms

The experiential learning model, developed by David Kolb in 1984, provides a significant theoretical framework for understanding how practical experiences can enrich and consolidate the learning process. This model is fundamental to vocational education and training, especially in fields such as law, where the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in real-life situations is crucial.

Fundamentals of the Experiential Learning Model

Kolb's experiential learning model is based on the idea that learning is a cyclical process involving the transformation of experience into knowledge through reflection and practice. According to Kolb, learning occurs in four interrelated stages:

Concrete Experience: The first stage of the learning cycle is the direct experience of an experience. This experience can be a task, a project or a situation in which one is actively involved.

Reflection on the Experience: After the specific experience, the individual reflects on what happened. This reflection allows one to evaluate what was done well, what could have been done differently, and the important aspects that were learned.

Abstract Conceptualization: Based on reflection, a deeper and more abstract understanding of the concepts and principles related to the experience develops. Here, the individual begins to formulate theories and concepts that explain and contextualize the lived experience.

Active Experimentation: Finally, new ideas and concepts are applied in future situations. Active experimentation allows ideas to be tested and refined through new experiences, completing the learning cycle.

Application of the Model in Free Law Firms

In the context of pro bono law firms, Kolb 's experiential learning model is effectively applied to facilitate the professional development of law students. These firms offer a unique platform where students can engage directly in the legal process, reinforcing their theoretical learning and enhancing their practical skills. Below is a breakdown of how each stage of the model manifests itself in a pro bono law firm environment:

Practical Experience: Students participate in real-life cases, interact with clients, and assist in the preparation and filing of legal documents. This hands-on experience allows them to deal with real-life situations and gain applied knowledge.

Reflection on Experience: After each case or assignment, students have the opportunity to reflect on their performance and the process followed. Reflection can take place through review meetings with supervisors or mentors, and through self-assessments and group discussions.

Abstract Conceptualization: Through reflection, students begin to understand and articulate the legal principles, litigation strategies, and ethical approaches necessary for professional practice. This stage also involves critical analysis of lived experience in comparison to legal theories and best practices.

Active Experimentation: The acquired knowledge is applied in new cases and situations. Students have the opportunity to try out different approaches and strategies based on their reflections and conceptualizations, allowing them to continually adjust and improve their professional practice.

Impact of the Model on Vocational Training

Applying the experiential learning model in pro bono law firms provides students with a deeper understanding of legal practice beyond the theoretical concepts learned in the classroom. Practical experience allows students to develop critical skills such as effective client communication, legal strategy development, and case management, which are essential for their future professional careers.

Furthermore, the Kolb model encourages continuous learning and adaptation, by allowing students to refine their skills and knowledge as they face and solve new challenges. This methodology not only improves students' professional competence, but also contributes to the quality of service offered at the pro bono law firm, benefiting both clients and future lawyers.

METHOD

The qualitative method is a research approach that focuses on understanding complex phenomena through the in-depth exploration of the experiences, perceptions and meanings that people attribute to certain events, situations or contexts. Unlike the quantitative method, which focuses on the measurement and statistical analysis of numerical variables, the qualitative method seeks to capture the richness and complexity of the phenomenon under investigation through descriptive and non-numerical data. Hernández- Sampieri (2014).

Main Features of the Qualitative Method

- 1.- **Exploratory Approach:** The qualitative method is ideal for exploring areas where a deep and detailed understanding is needed. It does not seek to test hypotheses or measure variables, but rather explores how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences.
- 2.- **Unstructured Data:** It is based on unstructured data such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations and document analysis. These data allow researchers to capture the complexity of human experiences.
- 3.- **Contextual Interpretation:** Qualitative analysis focuses on understanding phenomena within their specific context. Attention is paid to how people interpret their experiences in relation to their social and cultural environment.
- 4.- **Methodological Flexibility:** The qualitative research process is flexible and can adapt to changes during the study. This allows researchers to adjust their data collection and analysis methods as new ideas and themes emerge.

Qualitative Method Process in Research

- 1.- **Research Design:** In this stage, the objective of the study is defined and the data collection methods that best fit the purpose of the research are selected. Interview guides or focus groups are developed and the context in which the study will be carried out is determined.
- 2.- **Observation:** Systematic recording of behaviors and events in their natural environment.
- 3.- **Documentary Analysis:** Study of documents, texts or materials produced by people in the investigated context.
- 4.- **Data Collection:** Qualitative data collection may involve several techniques, such as:
 - A) **In-Depth Interviews:** Detailed conversations with individuals to explore their personal perspectives and experiences.
 - B) **Focus Groups:** Facilitated group discussions that allow interaction between participants and exploration of topics in a social context.

In the research on the University of Sonora's pro bono law firm, Campus Sur, two focus groups were conducted to collect qualitative data. The first group consisted of 8 clients of the firm, who provided their perspectives on the legal assistance received and the impact of the service on their cases. The second group consisted of 10 students involved with the firm, who shared their experiences regarding the practical training and professional opportunities offered. These focus groups provided a detailed view of both client satisfaction and the students' professional development.

1. Questions for Law Firm Clients:

- 1.- How did you find out about the free law firm of the University of Sonora, Navojoa Campus?

(Objective: To understand the channels of dissemination and knowledge of the firm among the community.)

- 2.- What was your main reason for seeking legal assistance from the firm?
(Objective: Identify the legal needs that prompted clients to use the firm.)

3.- How would you rate the level of attention and service received at the firm? Why? (Objective: To evaluate the quality of service and overall customer satisfaction.)

4.- In what ways do you think the firm has been especially useful to you? (Objective: Identify specific areas of impact and usefulness of the firm in the lives of clients.)

5.- Have you faced any difficulties or problems during your experience with the firm? If so, how was it resolved?

(Objective: Explore possible areas for improvement and the challenges faced by clients.)

6.- How would you compare the free law firm with other legal services you have used in the past?

(Objective: To evaluate the firm in relation to other options available to clients.)

II Questions for Law Firm Students :

1.- How would you describe your overall experience working at the pro bono law firm?

(Objective: To obtain an overview of the students' experience at the firm.)

2.- What aspects of working at the firm do you consider to have been most beneficial to your professional development?

(Objective: To identify the specific benefits that students obtain from their experience at the firm.)

3.- Can you give an example of a situation in which you applied theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom during your work at the law firm?

(Objective: Explore how academic knowledge is translated into real practices.)

4.- What challenges have you faced while working at the firm and how have you overcome them?

(Objective: Identify specific challenges and how students address them.)

5.- How has your experience at the firm impacted your perception of legal practice and your future professional goals?

(Objective: To assess the impact of the firm on students' professional careers and aspirations.)

6.- What skills or competencies have you developed that you consider important for your future career as a lawyer?

(Objective: Identify the development of practical skills and key competencies.)

7.- What suggestions do you have to improve the student experience at the law firm?

(Objective: To obtain recommendations to optimize the student experience at the firm.)

C) Interpretation and Presentation of Results : Results are interpreted based on the context and perspectives of participants. They are presented descriptively, using direct quotes and examples that illustrate the findings. Results may include narratives, theoretical models, or conceptual maps.

In the research on the Free Law Firm of the University of Sonora, Navojoa Campus, the qualitative method is used to gain a detailed understanding of the impact of the firm on both the community and students. The qualitative approach allows for exploring how clients perceive the services offered and how students experience their practical training.

Results

Eekelaar 's theory of access to justice underlines that the legal system should be designed to be accessible to all people, regardless of their economic capacity. Removing economic and

structural barriers is essential to ensure that all individuals can exercise their legal rights and receive fair treatment. Initiatives such as free legal services and legal education play a crucial role in promoting equal access to justice and reducing existing inequalities in the legal system.

Kolb's experiential learning model offers a valuable framework for professional development in practical settings such as pro bono law firms. By integrating practical experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation, law firms not only prepare students for effective legal practice, but also contribute to access to justice for the communities served. This approach ensures that learning is dynamic and relevant, providing students with essential tools for their professional success in the field of law.

Qualitative research conducted on the University of Sonora's pro bono law firm, Campus Sur, employed focus groups with clients and students to gain insight into the firm's impact and experience. Results reflect both the value of the service to the community and the benefits and challenges experienced by students. The most relevant findings are summarized below:

1. Impact on the Community

Clients of the firm have stated that the pro bono service has been of great importance, particularly for those with limited financial resources. The assistance provided in resolving complex legal problems, such as alimony disputes and custody issues, has been widely valued. Clients have highlighted the accessibility and personalized treatment they have received, underscoring that the firm has filled a significant gap in the provision of legal services within the community. This perception of value has been consistent, with the majority of clients indicating that the firm has had a positive and necessary impact on their lives by providing legal support at critical times.

2. Student Experience

Students involved in the firm describe their experience as highly enriching. The possibility of applying the theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom in a practical environment has been identified as a crucial advantage of their participation. The opportunity to work directly with clients and handle real cases has been fundamental to the development of their professional skills and to gaining a clear insight into legal practice. However, students have also pointed out certain challenges, such as time management and a high workload, which have required continuous adaptation and effective organizational strategies. Despite these challenges, the overall experience has been positively valued for its contribution to professional growth and preparation for future legal careers.

Conclusion

These results provide a comprehensive view of the impact of the pro bono law firm on the community and students, highlighting both significant benefits and challenges that must be addressed to continually improve the services offered.

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