

Strategies for Engaging the Public in Legal Education

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ABSTRACT

Legal education is traditionally viewed through the lens of professional training; however, its broader societal relevance lies in educating the public about their rights, responsibilities, and the legal systems that govern them. This paper examines innovative strategies for engaging diverse audiences in legal education, ranging from community-based outreach and digital media to school partnerships and simulations. It examines how creative pedagogical methods such as gamification, dramatization, and collaborative workshops can demystify complex legal processes. The role of law schools, professional organizations, and local institutions is also analyzed, with emphasis on the importance of identifying target audiences and maintaining sustainable partnerships. Feedback mechanisms, social media engagement, and community legal education (CLE) are shown to be effective tools for fostering a legally informed and empowered citizenry. By addressing structural barriers and incorporating public perspectives, legal education can be transformed into a tool for promoting justice, democracy, and civic participation.

Keywords: Public legal education, civic engagement, legal literacy, community outreach, law and society, access to justice, legal pedagogy, social media.

INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde quipped that “A lawyer is a person who writes a 10,000-word document and calls it a brief.” Law has fundamentally influenced philosophical thought, social engagement, and public policy, prompting some groups to educate the public about legal rights and the legal system. Legal education extends beyond formal credentials, encompassing public understanding and accessibility to legal processes. Engaging public legal education involves various methods for diverse audiences, including youth, often through games, competitions, puppetry, and group activities. Creative law-related projects, including drama and film, are viable approaches as well. Courts can host visits for the public or schoolchildren, while competitive introductions to legal action can be integrated into curricula and policy discussions. Courtroom simulations and detective-themed games allow participants to role-play scenarios they devise themselves. Engaging with legal issues can be done in both positive and negative lights, analyzing their origins and potential misuse. Pro bono lawyers can facilitate discussions, fostering collaborative planning with laypersons. These activities aim to cultivate better-informed and law-abiding citizens skilled in navigating services. Their success hinges on the defined outcomes and evaluation metrics, with potential criticism from providers if perceived as paternalistic or overly simplistic [1, 2].

The Importance of Public Engagement

Legal education's public engagement is historically deep and currently multifaceted. Bar associations have long been dedicated to civic education, despite dwindling public interest in legal issues. Prelaw programs aim to prepare students for law school, though many who enter accredited schools complete their studies. Extensive scholarship critiques legal education in terms of both discipline and pedagogy. The first Conference on the Future of Legal Education and Professionalism, along with various reports, emphasizes the need to connect with the public. Responses to perceived undemocratic practices in law education and initiatives to enhance public engagement highlight this concern. State supreme courts are increasingly scrutinizing educational practices that support democracy in law studies. Investigatory bodies urge or instruct law schools to implement civic education initiatives. Concurrently, two-thirds of the American

Bar Association's Vision 2020 emphasizes various supports for civic education. Recently, professional organizations, universities, legal scholars, and educators have committed to civic education as a key state action to educate both lawyers and citizens. For instance, the Nebraska Supreme Court formed the Nebraska Civic Education Commission to combat civic illiteracy amid concerns over insufficient civic programs in law schools. This commission includes civic leaders from the court, bar, secretary of state, public education, and universities. The first Civic Education Summit, held on May 5, 2003, brought together representatives from local governments, civic groups, and law schools. This networking led to the Nebraska Civic Education Plan, which aims to educate citizens as active participants in democracy [3, 4].

Identifying Target Audiences

One of the most important steps in designing and planning outreach is to identify the target audience. Who should your program connect with? Possible targets include incoming students, current students, students from nearby schools, parents or guardians, the general public, or specific public interest constituencies. There are many questions to consider when establishing the audience for outreach efforts, such as: What are the educational or outreach priorities? What input or educational assistance will the target audience want or need? What audiences are underserved regarding knowledge about the law or legal services? What topics require consensus among legal educators or lawyers before they become the subject of outreach efforts? What geographic area will the outreach efforts cover? These questions can be compiled into a list that can inform decision-making regarding target audiences. It is often helpful to take a broader approach to narrow down the eventual choices for specific target groups. Brainstorming potential audiences in an unstructured fashion can help generate ideas. The next step is to think through the criteria that matter in making plans possible, and how the potential audiences stack up against those criteria. A simple chart might be useful in scoring particular target audiences against each criterion. Finally, there may be communities of interest within some audiences, and further segmentation of the audience may be necessary for planning a successful program [5, 6].

Innovative Teaching Methods

The paradigm shift in legal education focuses outward toward a public increasingly aware of its need for access to justice. It aims to address the disparities in access to justice and dispute resolution as society emerges from pandemic fears. The framework presented is the culmination of years of dreaming and ongoing ideas, hoping to inspire those familiar with similar concepts. It invites collective control, critique, re-formulation, and articulation to generate new ideas and action. As the decade turns, significant needs and desires align with promising opportunities and technologies, potentially igniting the passions of professionals and scholars alike. Enhancing public dialogue around justice delivery highlights the necessity for a productive exchange. Numerous studies over the years have identified problems with justice systems and legal education, exposing unmet access-to-justice needs nationally and internationally. However, solutions have been scarce and inadequate, leading to cynicism about the lack of tangible actions. The widening gap between those who have and those in need threatens democracy's foundation. In response to years of discontent, a growing network of grassroots movements is emerging to democratize access to justice and services [7, 8].

Community Outreach Programs

Many laws and policies affect families and young people, yet many remain unaware of their existence or how to engage with them. Governments and institutions often believe individuals will seek this information independently, viewing failure to do so as their problem. However, community outreach and development emphasize the responsibility of those in power to make information accessible, understandable, and actionable. Law students increasingly participate in community outreach as part of their clinical legal education requirements. Events during law week often feature students sharing experiences with the public or leading workshops. These engagements not only provide students with a sense of fulfillment from sharing knowledge but also enhance their learning experience. Explaining legal concepts to novices requires deep understanding and clear communication. When done effectively, it can ignite curiosity in the audience, encouraging them to explore ideas and examples related to the students' initial engagement [9, 10].

Collaborations with Local Organizations

While conducting projects, cultivating collaborations with local organizations that endure beyond formal education is crucial. Assisting individuals with limited English proficiency to understand evictions requires time, expertise, and diverse knowledge that may not be present in a single class. After a project's completion, community partner outreach may diminish or end. Agricultural cooperative development can change significantly over three years, reflecting shifts in local food systems and support. Without

ongoing input from law students, completed materials may become outdated or unused. Such projects should aim to build sustainable collaborations with identified support groups, enhancing service depth and community engagement. Instruction on engaging with community groups and integrating local experience into legal education can be provided at academic orientations, fostering commitment to law school missions and garnering public support for curricular innovations. Formal classes that connect with underrepresented communities should be widely advertised, with faculty encouraged to share their multi-semester project knowledge through papers and presentations. As educators, academics have a responsibility to share their work, highlighting the impact of legal education on communities. Innovative work can also address structural barriers in legal education. In addition to funding community outreach post-graduation, law schools might explore ways to finance innovative projects, like mini-grants or summer stipends for clinical teaching. It's essential to closely examine structural barriers to create opportunities for integrating innovative projects into the curriculum, potentially requiring all students to engage in pro bono work, earning credits for case work and community outreach [11, 12].

Utilizing Social Media for Engagement

Organizations supporting legal education activities should have a robust social media presence. In particular, organizations need to be vigilant on social media platforms that have been staked out by the anti-legal education movement. Organizations will be most successful in this endeavor, however, by expanding the social media palette beyond Twitter and Facebook and employing other methods of engaging the public on social media, including video on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Another important avenue of outreach is digital public forums. With conversations about legal education becoming increasingly polarized, it will be critical for organizations to encourage a more nuanced and reasoned dialogue about legal education and its role in society. Digital tools like online forums could be useful for fostering such conversations. Legal educators receiving funding from organizations should be encouraged to reach out to public platforms for "Ask Me Anything" style conversations. Given the intensity of the conversations and restrictions on lawyers discussing certain topics on traditional media, it is critical for legal educators to embrace and help shape these debates before they take on a life of their own [13, 14].

Feedback Mechanisms

Bringing the public into law schools and vice versa fosters a symbiotic relationship where the public gains insights into legal matters relevant to them, while law schools enhance their community integration. This concept has prompted law schools to engage in public outreach. However, issues like poor planning, lack of communication expertise, and unclear objectives often reduce these initiatives to mere promotion rather than offering substantial benefits. This is particularly troubling for law schools, given their unique advantages such as legal expertise and dedicated staff. This article aims to boost law school outreach by offering guidance on effective media engagement. It outlines a strategic approach, addressing target audience identification, creative communication methods, message execution, and evaluation mechanisms. With this framework, law schools can implement thoughtful outreach initiatives that educate the public on significant legal issues and empower future lawyers. Ideally, outreach should be proactive, educational, and sustained, allowing both the public and law schools to mutually benefit from this engagement [15, 16].

Case Studies of Successful Engagement

One mode of engagement has been the development of Community Legal Education (CLE) within clinic and externship courses. CLE provides opportunities for students to research, analyze, and synthesize legal information, as well as deliver it in a manner that does not require an attorney to proceed, within a lawyering framework that recognizes non-lawyering deliveries as a legitimate, if often contingent, part of the lawyering process. It allows students to engage with non-lawyers on a vastly different plane than in most law school classrooms and, in many instances, provide those non-lawyers the ability to directly empower themselves within their respective situations. In terms of scope, CLE deliveries have ranged from single-preparation presentations to full-fledged workshops or informational pamphlets. Beyond general consumer educational presentations on immigration or family law issues, two more specific examples will illustrate how CLE has elicited enthusiastic engagement by students. For broadly significant, discrete, repeat issues, dissemination of informational pamphlets on an individual's options in a housing dispute or in seeking public benefits has been effective, with rates of future referrals exceeding expectations. More focused CLE opportunities exist in particular housing or family law issues that bear directly upon students, and have engendered even greater student enthusiasm than for wider-ranging issues. Engaging CLE on an issue affecting a large number of non-lawyers has yielded the full-time involvement of multiple students throughout a semester, with an expectation that a full-scale

presentation will occur. A component of engagement is the integration of law students into governmental and non-governmental offices where legal services are offered to the general public without charge. In these settings, the social context of the delivery of legal assistance is merely subtracted from, rather than elaborated upon, the vision bequeathed to law students. Once removed from intensive workshops wherein students interrogate a vision for how they will practice law, pre-professional, community-focused CSAs do not scaffold the sort of reflection necessary for engagement to occur. Law students return to school invigorated by helping non-laws in a social arena circumscribed to a training-wheels setting, one with too soft a landing for creative risk [17, 18].

Challenges in Public Engagement

Everyone involved in creating and implementing a program must be prepared for opposition and obstacles. Some criticism can signal importance and exposure. Events at the Brenner Center have initiated discussions on the role of lawyers and public interest. Constructive questioning exists, but most issues have already been addressed more eloquently. The proposed program, due to its visibility, will likely attract public inquiries about its viability. Almost any systemic change proposal, such as public defender programs or local jail standards, will invite legal objections from the bar and judiciary. Concerns range from the need for “adversarial” proceedings to traditional resistance stating, “That’s not how it’s done here.” A common barrier for reform is the mindset of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Reasonable disagreements may arise over what is “broken,” and successful reform needs to find recognized defects in the system and tackle them head-on. The Brenner Center must recognize the risk of becoming bogged down, either by inaction or overly aggressive initial steps. New ideas can take years to materialize, and balancing the urgency of action with a sensible approach is crucial. Early communication must be precise to avoid confusion. The Brenner Center needs to articulate a clear need for public interest lawyering to address skepticism. Three interrelated arguments support this. First, public interest lawyering is considered necessary. Failures in public interest practice nationwide reveal a lack of commitment or planning from the bar and highlight the substantial disenfranchisement felt by many [19, 20].

Future Trends in Legal Education Engagement

The legal academy is at a crucial turning point, with a significant drop in legal education applications. Traditional lecture-centric teaching has hindered engagement, necessitating innovative interventions to revitalize interest. Law schools must implement initiatives like “Law Day,” inviting actual leaders to discuss current legal issues, and fostering excitement among younger audiences to build future engagement. Events targeting middle and high school students, like mock trials and legal competitions, can help generate enthusiasm. Collaborating with undergraduate programs, schools can host competitions that draw legal papers and reward promising talent, enhancing visibility and stature. Current students can also engage with real Supreme Court cases, fostering a deeper understanding of the legal profession. While the decline in part-time students and competition from online offerings grow, creative solutions such as accelerated JD/LLM programs could attract more students. JD programs will remain central against potential disruptions but will need institutional commitment and innovation to adapt effectively [21, 22].

Policy Recommendations

The Principles of Good Legal Education were developed by leaders in legal education and bar admission in the common law world to reach a broader audience. They identify weaknesses in legal education and bar admission by discussing Good Practice and Common Serious Failures. The Principles aim to foster discussion, support lobbying for changes, and guide evaluations by agencies overseeing legal education and admissions. An extensive document accompanies the Principles to outline legislation relevant to legal education processes. It highlights general principles regarding stakeholder involvement in standard-setting, auditing, and examinations, while addressing public concerns about access to legal education, bar admission, and affordable, quality services. The Principles will form the basis for public accountability in regulating legal education and bar admission. Considering the prevalent distrust in self-regulation and growing dissatisfaction with some law schools, increased stakeholder involvement is anticipated. Technology impacts expectations of legal education and admissions, indicating potential shifts in public opinion. Certain law school performance issues are serious enough to be labeled as common, serious failures in regulation. Law students should explore alternative pathways before admission, and the legal profession should play a larger role in establishing standards for education and admission processes. Law schools should not operate without oversight, as it is essential to address these failures in legal education and bar admission effectively [23, 24].

Measuring Engagement Success

Measuring engagement success is crucial for refining engagement strategies, yet the legal field often lacks guidance on their effectiveness, especially in structured settings. Success measurement enhances evaluations by clarifying success perceptions and improving reporting on engagement efforts. Pre-program measures can capture participants' views on attorneys, expectations, and demographics. Post-program surveys can assess learning outcomes and changing perceptions. Observers outside the program can also provide insights. This information should be tracked over time to gauge changes and satisfaction across programs. Utilizing frameworks like flow theory and self-determination theory can aid in developing evaluation questions based on internal or external measures. Attendance and survey data typically offer essential insights, while pre- and post-program surveys may suffice in legal education. Small focus groups could provide timely feedback after sessions, with qualitative input from community organizations enriching the process. Intentional data collection is vital for effective evaluation strategies. Utilizing relevant literature can enhance structured events, and involving external observers can yield valuable feedback on audience engagement and potential improvements. Such data collection significantly bolsters engagement strategies, enhancing overall effectiveness [25, 26].

Ethical Considerations in Engagement

Engagement entails responsibilities that differ from traditional lawyering, requiring lawyers, educators, and scholars to focus on accountability and the broader consequences of their efforts to connect with the community. These engagement strategies emphasize individual and collective responsibility, highlighting that values and accountability are realized through actions and inaction. Responsibilities are both natural and socially determined, necessitating reflection on interconnectedness and the social implications of one's actions and omissions. When viewing educational engagement through a humanistic lens, responsibility is seen in two dimensions: a narrow focus on risk management and a broader obligation that goes beyond merely avoiding pitfalls. This broader perspective encourages deeper societal considerations concerning what it means to engage. True engagement suggests a consensual and respectful relationship, prompting questions about the ethical duties and missions behind outreach initiatives. It's essential to critically evaluate mission statements and pedagogical aims, ensuring that the act of participation genuinely values all stakeholders involved rather than providing mere comfort in engagement [27, 28, 29].

CONCLUSION

Effective public engagement in legal education is crucial for building a more just and democratic society. Traditional methods must evolve to meet the changing needs and media habits of diverse communities. This involves identifying underserved audiences, utilizing interactive and culturally relevant teaching tools, and fostering long-term partnerships with local organizations. Social media platforms and community legal education initiatives offer accessible entry points for legal understanding, particularly among youth and marginalized groups. However, success requires commitment to clear objectives, sustainable planning, and continuous feedback. Law schools and legal institutions must invest in outreach not just as a promotional tool, but as a civic responsibility. By doing so, they nurture legally literate citizens capable of advocating for themselves and holding institutions accountable. Ultimately, democratizing legal knowledge contributes to narrowing the justice gap and reinforcing public trust in the legal system.

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