

A Floor, Not a Ceiling: The ABA's 2016 Experiential Learning Standard and the Unfinished Reform of American Legal Education

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Abstract

American legal education has undergone a significant transformation since the colonial era, when apprenticeship served as the primary means of professional preparation. As higher education faces increasing pressure to produce workforce-ready graduates, legal education offers an instructive case study of the effects of prioritizing academic rigor over applied preparation—effects evident in client services, access to justice, and ongoing debates over professional competence. Drawing on Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycle and Dewey's (1938/2015) foundational argument that structured reflection transforms experience into knowledge, this paper argues that the dominant Langdellian model, established at Harvard in the 1870s, structurally underdeveloped the conditions that professional competence requires. Landmark reform efforts, including the 1979 Cramton Report, the 1992 MacCrate Report, the 2007 Carnegie Report, and the American Bar Association's (ABA) 2014 adoption of Standard 303(a)(3), implemented beginning in the 2016–2017 academic year, demonstrate a pattern of institutional acknowledgment without institutional resolve. This article argues that the six-credit-hour experiential requirement, implemented beginning in the 2016–2017 academic year, while a meaningful threshold, represents a floor rather than a full commitment to experiential education. The article calls for continued examination of how law schools, particularly those serving rural and underserved populations, can move beyond minimum compliance toward substantive reform.

Keywords: legal education, experiential learning, clinical legal education, case method, law school reform

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The practice of law, long held in high esteem, is fundamentally a public profession (Barrington et al., 2024; Sullivan et al., 2007). Through their important work, lawyers help advocate, uphold, and craft the law, which serves as the bedrock of a functioning society (Sullivan et al., 2007). However, there is growing evidence of a fundamental disconnect between lawyer training and professional ideals and the real-world practice and application of law during and after law school (Kuehn, 2016; Sullivan et al., 2007). Robert Gordon (2019) observed that "in no profession is the gulf greater between ideals and practice than it is for lawyers" (p. 177). This observation captures the persistent challenge at the center of legal education: preparing graduates who are equipped not only to analyze doctrine but to translate that knowledge into effective, ethical, and independent practice (Kuehn, 2016). Some legal scholars advocate for an increased emphasis on hands-on training via experiential learning while students are in law school as a way to bridge this gulf and provide students with opportunities to develop an ethical professional identity before entering the legal profession (Joy, 2018; Thomson, 2015).

Experiential learning is a formal educational theory, not simply a synonym for hands-on activity. Kolb (2015) defined learning as the process by which "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 49) and theorized that meaningful learning requires completing a four-stage cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Kolb built this framework on the foundational contributions of John Dewey, who argued that all genuine education comes through experience and that experience without structured reflection can miseducate as readily as it can teach (Dewey, 1938/2015). Reflection is not incidental to this model; it is the mechanism through which raw experience becomes transferable professional knowledge. Learners must connect what they encounter in practice to broader frameworks, test those frameworks in new situations, and revise their understanding through repeated cycles of doing and thinking (Dewey, 1938/2015; Kolb, 2015).

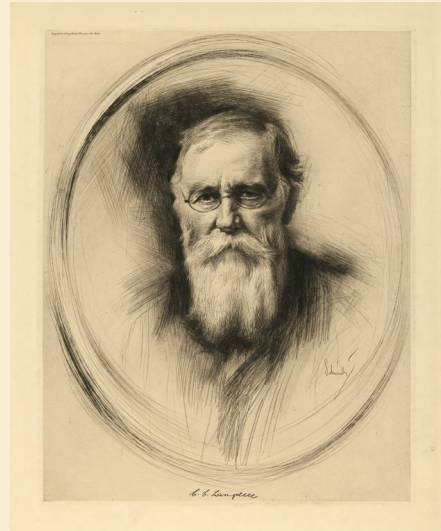
Applied to legal education, these theoretical frameworks reveal the deficiency of the pedagogical model that dominates legal training today: the Langdellian model. The Langdellian model, which emerged in the 1870s at Harvard Law School, centers on the combination of case study analysis and Socratic pedagogy (Kimball, 2014). The Socratic method in the classroom

engages students primarily in abstract conceptualization, the third stage of Kolb's cycle, while systematically omitting the concrete experience and structured reflection that the cycle requires to produce durable professional judgment. As Sullivan et al. (2007) observed, "because new learning must always be grafted onto existing understanding, the pedagogy must somehow make the connections between what the learner knows and believes and the kinds of thinking needed for professional success" (p. 59). Yet legal education has historically resisted the integration of experiential learning and reflection (Leering, 2017). Students and employers report that law school is too theoretical and lacks the practical application needed to enter practice upon graduation (Casey, 2021; Darian-Smith, 2016; Maranville et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2007). This critique is not new, but its urgency has grown as the costs of inadequate preparation fall hardest on clients, communities, and rural populations with the least access to legal support (Tomisich, 2024). The story of how legal education both created and failed to close this gap unfolds across more than a century of institutional reform.

The arc of this history is short to state but long in the making. Beginning with the 2016–2017 academic year, the American Bar Association's (ABA) Standard 303(a)(3), adopted in 2014, required every law student to complete at least six credit hours of experiential coursework before graduation (ABA, 2022). The mandate did not emerge from sudden insight. It was the delayed answer to a structural problem built into legal education more than a century earlier, when Christopher Columbus Langdell (see Figure 1) installed the case

Figure 1

Etching of Christopher Columbus Langdell



Note. From Christopher Columbus Langdell [Etching on paper], by O. J. Schneider, 1906, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, United States (Object No. NPG.77.87). CC0 1.0.

method and the Socratic classroom as the defining pedagogy of the American law school (Kimball, 2014). That model professionalized legal training and secured its place within the university, but it did so by elevating doctrinal analysis above practice, a choice whose consequences compounded across generations of graduates (Stevens, 1983). The reforms that followed, from the 1979 Cramton Report through the 1992 MacCrate Report to the 2007 Carnegie Report, each named the same deficiency, and each fell short of resolving it. Read in sequence, this history reveals more than a slow institutional awakening. It demonstrates that advanced professional learning cannot rest on abstraction alone, and that a system that severs knowledge from its application will reproduce the same preparation gap no matter how often it acknowledges the flaw (Joy, 2018; Kuehn, 2016).

This paper examines how American legal education arrived at the ABA experiential learning requirement in Standard 303(a)(3), tracing the structural and cultural forces that delayed meaningful reform, and argues that the six-credit-hour standard, while a significant threshold, reflects a pattern of institutional acknowledgment without institutional resolve. The analysis draws on foundational scholarship in legal education, landmark professional reports, and the regulatory frameworks that have shaped curriculum development over time. Understanding this history is essential for educators and policymakers committed to equipping future practitioners for the full demands of professional life. The preparation gap in legal education is not a historical accident but a structural consequence of the Langdellian model's systematic exclusion of key components of the experiential learning cycle, particularly concrete experience and reflective observation (Kolb, 2015).

Historical Foundations: The Apprenticeship Era and the Origins of Practical Training

Prior to the rise of university-based legal education, the preparation of American lawyers occurred primarily through apprenticeship, commonly referred to as reading law (Joy, 2018; Stevens, 1983). Under this model, aspiring practitioners entered the offices of established attorneys and acquired professional knowledge through direct observation, document preparation, client contact, and mentored practice (McManis, 1981). The system was

inherently experiential. Legal knowledge was gained in context through continuous, iterative engagement with real legal problems, forming the foundation of lasting professional learning, as Kolb (2015) later theorized. Apprenticeship, at its best, engaged all four stages of the experiential cycle: students encountered concrete legal problems, observed and reflected under supervision, built conceptual frameworks from recurring patterns, and experimented through progressively independent practice.

Reading law typically spanned two to three years, during which a student might spend mornings copying deeds and pleadings by hand to internalize the forms of legal documents, afternoons sitting with the supervising attorney through client meetings, and evenings working through assigned texts (McManis, 1981; Stevens, 1983). The range of experience depended entirely on the supervising attorney's practice. A student placed with a generalist in a rural county might observe land disputes, criminal proceedings, probate matters, and contract negotiations in a single month; a student in a narrow specialty practice might not (Joy, 2018). There was no set curriculum, no formative or summative assessment, and no guarantee of competency by the supervising attorney (McManis, 1981; Stevens, 1983).

The apprenticeship model was not without significant limitations. Quality of preparation varied considerably depending on the supervising attorney's capacity and commitment, and access was shaped by social networks and economic resources (McManis, 1981; Stevens, 1983). As the legal profession grew in complexity, the inconsistency of the apprenticeship system became increasingly untenable because it could not assure the public of consistent legal training (Joy, 2018). The stage was set for a more fundamental reorganization of legal education.

The Langdellian Shift: How the Case Method Displaced Practice and Shaped a Century of Legal Education

The transformation of American legal education accelerated with the appointment of Christopher Columbus Langdell as Dean of Harvard Law School in 1870 (Joy, 2018; Kimball, 2014). Langdell and the Harvard administration were drawn to the idealized German model of the university, shaped by academic intellectuals and driven by the scientific method (Stevens,

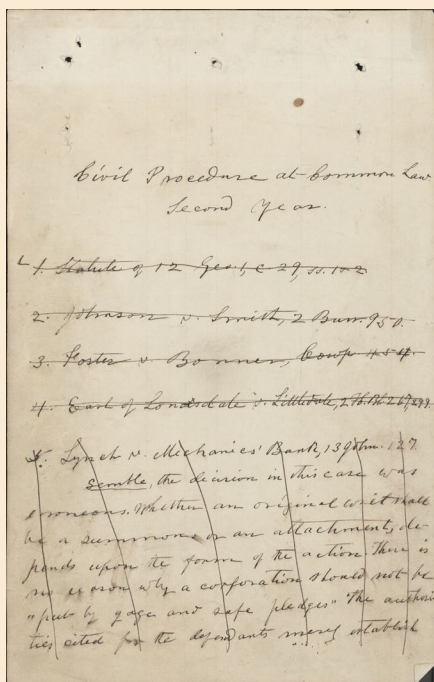
1983; Sullivan et al., 2007). This model prioritized advanced epistemology, emphasizing formal and observable knowledge, and applied the scientific method to the analysis of law. Within this framework, the case method was adopted and Socratic pedagogy emerged, training students to "think like a lawyer" by directing focus away from what a student knows and toward what a student can do through structured analytical reasoning (Kimball, 2014; McManis, 1981; Stevens, 1983; Sullivan et al., 2007, p. 6).

In practice, the Socratic method required students to read assigned appellate opinions before arrival (see Figure 2) knowing they might be called on without warning to recite the facts, identify the legal issue, describe the court's reasoning, and then defend their analysis as the professor asked questions designed to test their reasoning (Joy, 2018; Weissbrodt, 2005). The method was deliberately uncomfortable. Its logic was that pressure produced precision: a student who could reason clearly under interrogation in a lecture hall could do so anywhere (Dillon, 1980; Weissbrodt, 2005). Law lent itself to this approach because its raw material, appellate opinions, was already organized around argument and counterargument, and because the ability to read precedent and apply it to novel facts was genuinely central to what lawyers did (Joy, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2007).

The Langdellian model spread rapidly through elite law schools and became the dominant

Figure 2

Langdell's Handwritten Civil Procedure Syllabus, 1870s



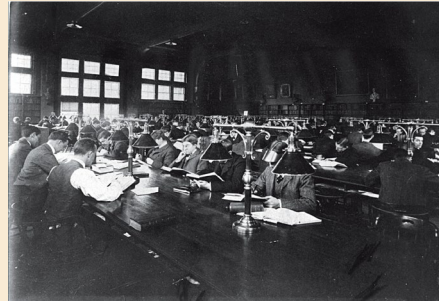
Note. C. C. Langdell's handwritten syllabus for Civil Procedure at Common Law: Second Year. From C. C. Langdell research notes and correspondence (LAW.MMC.168, Box 12, Folder 16), Harvard Law School Library, Historical & Special Collections.

pedagogical approach in American legal education by the early twentieth century (Appleman, 2005; Joy, 2018; Kimball, 2014). Its appeal was considerable. The case method was intellectually demanding, scalable to large enrollments, and lent academic legitimacy to legal education at a moment when universities were consolidating professional degree programs under the banner of scholarly rigor. However, a central and lasting consequence followed. Law schools came to define teaching excellence in terms of doctrinal mastery, and faculty culture came to treat practice experience as largely irrelevant to scholarly qualification (Joy, 2018; Ponoroff, 2019). Ponoroff (2019) argued that this foundational tension between practice and research has never been fully resolved, and that the blend between the two has always been "uneven and fraught" (p. 323).

An unintended effect of the case method was a delayed emphasis on practical skills training and limited development of an ethical professional identity while in law school (Sullivan et al., 2007). Traditional legal education proved effective in delivering structured doctrinal knowledge through intensive study and reading (see Figure 3), but fell short in preparing students for substantive engagement with real-world application and the formation of professional values (Maranville et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2007). This gap between classroom preparation and professional readiness has been a persistent feature of legal education that reformers have spent decades trying to address.

Figure 3

Students Studying in Austin Hall's Reading Room



Note. Students studying in Austin Hall's Reading Room, which housed the Harvard Law School Library for almost 50 years. From *Hitting the Books in Austin Hall's Reading Room* [Photograph], by Harvard Law School Historical & Special Collections, n.d., Harvard Law School.

Early Advocacy and the Emergence of Clinical Legal Education

Early critiques of the Langdellian model emerged quickly. Legal scholars

and practitioners recognized almost immediately that preparing lawyers solely through appellate case analysis left graduates without the tools they would need on the first day of practice (Joy, 2018; McManis, 1981; Walker, 2014). Early scholars pushed back, observing that law schools “lagged behind all other professions ... in this matter of providing systematic and experienced clinical and practical instruction” (Rowe, 1917, p. 596). In response to this growing tension, the 1960s saw law schools’ gradual introduction of clinical education as a way to address the growing need for social purpose (Sullivan et al., 2007). Clinical legal education aimed to engage students directly in active legal work under the supervision of practicing lawyers or clinical faculty (Wilson, 2018). These early clinical programs were typically small, underfunded, and treated as ancillary to the primary case method work of legal education (Joy, 2019; Stevens, 1983; Wilson, 2018). Nevertheless, they represented the first sustained institutional recognition that law students required structured exposure to practice before entering the profession (Joy, 2018). Clinical programs engaged in Kolb’s (2015) full learning cycle, providing students with concrete client experience, structured supervisory reflection, and the opportunity to apply and revise their legal reasoning in real practice contexts (Thomas & Johnson, 2020).

Clinical legal education placed students in the role of practicing attorneys under faculty supervision. In a law school clinic, a student would interview a client, assess the legal problem, research applicable law, draft correspondence or pleadings, appear in court or before administrative bodies, and receive structured feedback from a supervising faculty member throughout (Chemerinsky, 2009; Thomas & Johnson, 2020; Wilson, 2018). The experience was deliberately cumulative: unlike a doctrinal course where each class was largely independent, a clinic required a student to carry a matter forward, managing relationships, deadlines, and professional judgment over weeks or months (Chemerinsky, 2009; Clinical Legal Education Association, 2013; Kuehn, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2007; Wilson, 2018). Students frequently reported that time in the clinic was the first time law school felt connected to the real work of being a lawyer (The NALP Foundation & National Association for Law Placement, 2022; Tomisich, 2024). Although clinical legal education evolved to become a permanent feature in legal training, it provided only narrow exposure to active work, thus failing to integrate practice with reflection, ethics, theory, and professional judgment (Joy, 2019; Leering, 2017; Moliterno, 1996).

The legal education community's formal engagement with the question of practical legal training deepened in the late 20th century, as a series of task forces and commissioned reports began documenting the scope of the preparation gap. The American Bar Association, the most influential professional organization in U.S. legal education, commissioned two seminal reports that became central to later discussions of professional preparation in legal education (American Bar Association, 2022; Clinical Legal Education Association, 2013): the 1979 *Report and Recommendations of the Task Force on Lawyer Competency: The Role of Law Schools*, commonly known as the Cramton Report (American Bar Association, Task Force on Lawyer Competency, 1979), and the 1992 *Legal Education and Professional Development: An Educational Continuum*, commonly known as the MacCrate Report (American Bar Association, Task Force on Law Schools and the Profession: Narrowing the Gap [ABA Task Force], 1992). Both reports identified law school training as predominantly theoretical, lacking in ethical professional identity development, and deficient in practical skill training. Steele (2003) noted that the MacCrate Report initiated a broad national dialogue about how legal education could better align with professional demands, though its implementation recommendations were met with significant resistance from some sectors of the academy.

Building the Case for Reform: Landmark Reports and the Limits of Voluntary Change

The late 20th and early 21st centuries produced a concentrated body of national reform advocacy that brought the preparation gap into sharp institutional focus and set the conditions for the ABA's eventual, if limited, accreditation response. These conditions were primed by the 2007 publication of *Educating Lawyers: Preparation for the Profession of Law*, commonly known as the Carnegie Report, which represented a significant escalation of the reform conversation (Sullivan et al., 2007). The Carnegie Report synthesized decades of critique and concluded that "a law degree requires no experience beyond honing legal analysis in the classroom and taking tests" and that "in most schools, direct preparation for practice is entirely up to student initiative" (as cited in Foxhoven, 2010, p. 337). The Carnegie framework described the ideal

legal professional education as three apprenticeships: a first in cognitive and analytical training, a second in practical skill development, and a third in professional identity formation (Sullivan et al., 2007). The report argued that American law schools were systematically underdeveloped in the second and third apprenticeships, producing graduates who were analytically capable but often unprepared to translate that capability into the complex, judgment-intensive demands of actual legal practice (Kuehn, 2016; Sullivan et al., 2007).

One influential publication in this reform movement was Stuckey's (2007) *Best Practices for Legal Education: A Vision and a Road Map*. A subsequent edited collection, *Building on Best Practices: Transforming Legal Education in a Changing World* (Maranville et al., 2015), developed reform guidance concerning law school missions, curricular balance, pathways, integration, and sequencing. The collection thus offered a substantial resource for law schools seeking to implement curricular change. The related apprenticeship framework—under which professional education should cultivate cognitive understanding, practical performance, and ethical professional identity—was articulated most prominently in the Carnegie Report (Sullivan et al., 2007). The Carnegie Report argued that legal education had privileged the first of these dimensions while leaving professional formation comparatively underdeveloped (Sullivan et al., 2007). Tokarz et al. (2014) similarly argued that legal education stood at a crossroads, requiring innovation, integration, and pluralism to meet the evolving demands of both the profession and the communities lawyers serve. Together, these reports and scholars contributed to a scholarly and professional consensus that legal education required structural reorientation.

The Clinical Legal Education Association (CLEA) gave institutional voice to this consensus in a July 2013 comment submitted to the ABA during its revision of the accreditation standards. CLEA, then representing more than 1,000 clinical and other law teachers, urged the ABA to require at least 15 credits of experiential coursework within the minimum 83-credit JD curriculum (Clinical Legal Education Association, 2013). The proposal argued that law schools lagged behind other professional schools in the extent to which their curricula required experiential education. CLEA compared legal education with medicine, where more than half of students' educational credits were devoted to clinical coursework, and social work, where field education constituted approximately one-third of required credits (Clinical Legal Education

Association, 2013). At the time of CLEA's proposal, however, the ABA Standards did not impose a freestanding, credit-based experiential-learning requirement. Instead, the pre-2014 standards required schools to provide "substantial opportunities" for live-client or other real-life practice experiences and required students to receive instruction in professional skills, but they did not require every student to complete a specified number of experiential credits. In 2014, the ABA adopted Standard 303(a)(3), which appeared in the 2014–2015 Standards and required each JD student to complete at least six credits of qualifying experiential coursework. Because the ABA required a minimum of 83 credits for the JD, the new six-credit minimum represented approximately 7.2% of the minimum JD curriculum—not less than 1%. The 15-credit requirement proposed by CLEA would have represented approximately 18.1% of that same 83-credit minimum (Clinical Legal Education Association, 2013; American Bar Association, 2014).

ABA Standard 303: A Necessary but Insufficient Response

Despite the growing weight of scholarly and professional advocacy, the integration of experiential learning into law school curricula faced persistent and multilayered barriers. At the curricular level, critics argued that expanded experiential requirements would be too expensive or too subjective, would stifle curricular flexibility, and could pose a risk to bar passage rates (Joy, 2018; Vande Lune, 2015). Clinical programs are more resource-intensive than traditional doctrinal courses, requiring lower student-to-faculty ratios and more full-time clinical faculty (Vande Lune, 2015). Some faculty and administrators (Foxhoven, 2010) framed the expansion of experiential requirements as incompatible with the time needed to prepare students for the bar examination, which remained the primary external accountability measure for law school accreditation.

The concern that expanded experiential requirements would reduce academic rigor reflected a deeper structural resistance embedded in legal academia's culture. Sullivan et al. (2007) observed that separating learning from practice had produced far-reaching consequences, and that "learning the law loses a key dimension when it fails to provide grounding in an understanding of legal practice from the inside" (p. 8). Students and employers consistently reported the consequences of this separation: graduates who could analyze

doctrine effectively but were unable to perform the practical tasks of lawyering on day one of employment (Casey, 2021; Darian-Smith, 2016; Joy, 2018). Nicholson (2020) argued that the perceived value of a law degree was diminishing in part because graduates entered the workforce lacking foundational professional skills, a perception with direct consequences for law school enrollment and the profession's public standing.

Beginning with the 2016–2017 academic year, ABA Standard 303(a)(3) required law students to complete at least six credit hours of experiential coursework—defined as simulation courses, law clinics, or field placements—as a condition of graduation (ABA, 2022; Vande Lune, 2015). In guidance originally issued in 2015 and revised in 2023, the ABA's Managing Director clarified that inserting skills components into otherwise doctrinal courses would not satisfy the standard and that qualifying courses must be primarily experiential in nature (ABA, 2023). The guidance further specifies that experiential courses should integrate doctrine, theory, skills, and legal ethics; develop the concepts underlying professional skills; and provide multiple opportunities for performance and self-evaluation. The updated standard made experiential coursework a graduation requirement at ABA-accredited law schools.

While this requirement represented the ABA's first substantive step to incorporate practical skills training into required law school credits, it fell considerably short of what CLEA and other advocates had proposed (Tomisich, 2024). At six of the minimum 83 credits required for graduation, the experiential requirement constituted approximately 7% of the minimum credits required for a JD (ABA, 2022). Bess (2022) noted that professional identity formation, one of the core purposes of experiential education, requires sustained and iterative engagement that a minimal credit requirement alone cannot reliably produce. Kuehn and Moss (2019) further observed that the relationship between law school coursework structure and bar exam outcomes is more complex than critics of experiential education often acknowledged, and that well-designed clinical courses did not demonstrably diminish bar preparation.

The six-credit experiential learning mandate did not resolve the preparation gap so much as expose how much work remained. Standard 303 has since been revised beyond the experiential-credit requirement, with the ABA's 2022 revisions adding requirements that law schools provide substantial

opportunities for professional identity development and deliver education on bias, cross-cultural competency, and racism (Bender, 2024; Jones, 2024). These additions signal a broader reconceptualization of what legal education owes its students, moving from doctrinal mastery alone toward the formation of ethical, reflective, and resilient practitioners. Yet the same pattern of institutional acknowledgment without institutional resolve persists. The ABA left schools without detailed implementation guidance, producing a patchwork of programs that vary widely in rigor and make meaningful outcome measurement difficult (Jones, 2024). Compliance approaches range from minimalist check-the-box gestures to robust, critically informed curricula, and the depth of any school's response often depends on institutional will rather than the regulatory floor (Bender, 2024). This unfinished quality points to the work ahead. Scholars now debate not whether experiential and formative learning belong in the curriculum, but how to define, deliver, and assess them, and how to do so in ways that address persistent failures in student well-being, professional formation, and equitable access without simply layering new mandates atop the same Langdellian foundation (Bender, 2024; Jones, 2024).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that legal education's preparation gap is structural, not incidental. It is rooted in a century-long institutional preference for doctrinal abstraction over the full experiential learning cycle that professional competence requires. When Christopher Columbus Langdell installed the case method at Harvard in the 1870s, he did more than introduce a teaching technique. He defined law as a science to be studied through appellate opinions in a library, and he built the institutional architecture that carried that definition into the 20th century (Kimball, 2014; Stevens, 1983). The model professionalized legal training and secured its place in the university, but it did so by treating practice experience as extraneous to real legal learning and, in time, as a mark against scholarly qualification (Joy, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2007).

The effort to rebalance that model was long, uneven, and driven by repeated diagnosis. Scholars asked why there was no clinical lawyer-school as early as 1933, but clinical education did not gain real curricular footing until the 1960s and 1970s (Chemerinsky, 2009; Frank, 1933). The 1992 MacCrate Report named

the gap between law school and practice and catalogued the skills and values that graduates lacked (ABA Task Force, 1992). The 2007 Carnegie Report went further, arguing that legal education overdeveloped the first apprenticeship of doctrinal knowledge while neglecting the second and third, the apprenticeships of practice and of professional identity (Sullivan et al., 2007). The Clinical Legal Education Association pressed these arguments into the accreditation process across the following decade (Clinical Legal Education Association, 2013). Each of these interventions identified the same deficiency with growing precision, and each fell short of compelling structural change.

That pattern is the larger lesson the history yields. The six-credit experiential requirement in ABA Standard 303(a)(3), implemented beginning in the 2016–2017 academic year, was the culmination of more than eighty years of advocacy, and it remains a floor rather than a ceiling. Requiring roughly 7% of the minimum credits required for a law degree to be experiential is not a structural commitment to experiential education (Bender, 2024; Clinical Legal Education Association, 2013; Foxhoven, 2010; Jones, 2024). It is a minimum viable acknowledgment that the prior standard had failed. Kolb's experiential learning cycle produces durable professional judgment only when concrete experience and structured reflection complete the loop that doctrinal instruction leaves open (Dewey, 1938/2015; Kolb, 2015; Leering, 2017). Six isolated credits cannot supply that completion, nor can they produce the second and third apprenticeships that Carnegie identified as essential to professional identity formation (Clinical Legal Education Association, 2013; Sullivan et al., 2007; Thomson, 2015; Vande Lune, 2015). The transition from student to practitioner requires the structured, ongoing support for professional identity development that most curricula still do not provide (Bess, 2022; Thomson, 2015). The persistence of employer and graduate dissatisfaction reflects that same unfinished work (Casey, 2021; Darian-Smith, 2016).

For legal educators and higher education scholars, this record is both cautionary and instructive. It shows how institutional inertia can delay reform for generations, and it shows how sustained scholarly and professional advocacy can eventually reshape accreditation and curriculum. The implications reach beyond urban law markets. Rural communities, which depend disproportionately on generalist solo and small-firm practitioners, bear a particular cost when graduates arrive underprepared (Tomisich, 2024). How

law schools implement experiential requirements, how graduates evaluate their preparation across diverse practice contexts, and how rural and underserved populations experience the consequences of the preparation gap all represent pressing questions (Bender, 2024; Jones, 2024; Kuehn, 2016). Tracing this history to its present helps clarify these questions and points to important areas for future research.

Declaration of Generative AI Use in Scientific Writing

During the preparation of this work, I used Consensus and Perplexity AI search tools to locate relevant peer-reviewed articles for reading and analysis. I also used Claude and Grammarly to enhance the readability and language of the manuscript. All content in this publication is my own, and I take full responsibility for it. I reviewed all sources and evaluated and edited all AI-generated suggestions.

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