

good move!

The Sixty Plus, Inc., Elderlaw Clinic, moved into the Cooley Center in Trinity Term, tripling its usable space and providing a true-to-life, law office setting for clinic students, clients, and faculty

The 20-year-old organization, which provides hands-on legal experience for students and free legal assistance for senior citizens, formerly occupied donated space in a local hospital. While Sixty Plus was grateful for the space, the popular program needed more room.



PROFESSOR
NORM FELL

Now there is more than enough room for everyone. Professors and students can spend their time on-task rather than taking up numerous hours each week commuting. Professor Norm Fell, director of the clinic said the disorientation and loss of time involved in packing up all one's papers, battling through construction, and then trying to get organized again — often two or three times a day — was resulting in a big loss in productivity. At the new building, students have their own work spaces so their projects remain undisturbed while they meet with clients. They've often been seen utilizing the full work hours of the building, a comfort level that Fell encourages.

Technology was vastly improved with the move. The new clinic sports a dual system of networking. Everyone in the clinic is networked to each other and, in addition, the clinic is networked to the rest of the school.

The one potential drawback to the move — client parking — turned out to be no problem at all. Seniors have not been averse to making the trip downtown, plus the clinic pays for clients' first two hours in the ramp next to the building.

The effect on the students has been wonderful, Fell said.

"They feel more like lawyers. The atmosphere is conducive to professionalism," he said.

Sixty Plus also sports its own library as well, meaning students don't have to go far to do the research they need.

"We designed the office to fit the function of serving clients," Fell explained.

The move can only further improve the image of the clinic, which has already achieved national recognition for its mission, scope, and organization.

"We get many students (at Cooley) who've heard of the program," Fell said.

At the other end of the graduation continuum, the students who've gone through the program are often ambassadors for Cooley and the program itself.

Sixty Plus alumni are "leaps and bounds ahead of their peer group in their readiness to practice law," Fell explained. "The clinical experience gives them an advantage. Employers find that Cooley students perform well. We get tremendous feedback."

Sixty Plus alumni keep in touch with their professors long after graduation and many have told Fell that it was their clinical experience that landed them their first jobs.

Fell heard from one employer who was interviewing students for the firm's trust department. Normally, the employer told Fell, the firm only interviewed students from "big name" schools. But, of the three finalists for the job, only the Cooley student could define what a trust was and had actually done one.

"He was just blown away by the experience," Fell said of the employer. "Now he is on the contact list for Career Services."

The clinic is an experience that stays with students long after they've fulfilled their commitment. In their statement that they make at the end of their program, a majority of senior students say that Sixty Plus was "one of the most significant personal and professional growth experiences" they encountered at school, Fell said. "They come in as students and go out as lawyers."

About 100 students, working in teams, participate in Sixty Plus each year. The clinic serves about 1,000 clients during that time frame. The students (usually in their final three terms of law school) are to see clients on their own, then review cases with the faculty members.

"They've already learned they can be students," Fell said.

"They have no idea if they can be lawyers. They're confronted with applying what they've learned."

All paperwork is reviewed by an adviser, and only faculty members can sign off on documents.

The Sixty Plus office is settled in now on the Cooley Center's sixth floor, and thriving with a steady flow of faculty, students, and clients in what is, essentially, a full-fledged law office. ■