



Community-Based Social Justice Work: The WILLOW Project

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College students are frequently exposed to local and global injustices, yet they may feel powerless to do anything about them. Incorporating real-world experience into university-level human rights education (HRE) helps students discover what they can do to facilitate rights protection and forward progress. Practical, hands-on work linked to social justice goals empowers them to believe they can affect positive change. An example of this work comes from Webster University in Saint Louis, Missouri, where students gain such experience through a pro bono clemency project. The Women Initiate Legal Lifelines to Other Women (WILLOW) Project is a non-profit organization that provides free legal assistance to wrongfully incarcerated women. The project is dedicated to improving the lives of those who cannot fully access the justice system; those in prison due to poverty, oppression, violence, exploitation, and other injustices. The WILLOW Project is dedicated to achieving the right to “equality before the law,” striving to provide our clients a legal voice and to encourage lasting change.

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Student research and investigation into clients' cases have yielded positive results for the WILLOW Project, while providing practical experience for students hoping to undertake careers focused on rights, social justice, and legal advocacy. Student endeavors keep us up-to-date with the constantly shifting legal landscape, including the latest issues and research regarding clemency. Students help themselves, as well as the clients, to gain a broader understanding of the limitations of the U.S. criminal justice system and how it often adversely impacts low-income and otherwise disadvantaged individuals. Indeed, the project's client cases starkly demonstrate these issues because all of the women are incarcerated survivors of horrific violence, who were wrongfully charged and sentenced. Because these women are post-conviction, the most realistic form of relief is a grant of clemency from the governor of the state of Missouri. However, the Willow Project pursues every possible avenue that may arise to get clients out of prison, including seeking possible appeals, parole, commutation, and/or exoneration.

This chapter reviews a clinical model that engages students in addressing the complexities and issues of the U.S. criminal justice system, especially in the area of wrongful conviction. In this piece, I aim to address ethical and pedagogical challenges, as well as benefits in the creation of such a model. First, I outline the WILLOW Project—its beginnings, the legal landscape it operates within, and its current caseload. Second, I discuss the clinical education model and undergraduate student internships—including the role of key partners inside and outside the university, as well as pedagogical approaches and ethical concerns. Lastly, I provide starting points for educators considering the creation of similar educational opportunities at their own institutions.

OVERVIEW OF THE WILLOW PROJECT

As an attorney and a legal studies professor for more than 25 years, I have represented many women in their legal cases, primarily by assisting them with Orders of Protection and/or divorce cases in situations of domestic violence. In 2011, I agreed to take on the post-conviction case of a wrongfully convicted woman named Angel Charlene Stewart who was long incarcerated for crimes she did not commit. Her clemency case required me to petition Missouri's governor to release from prison this very low-mental functioning woman, who had slipped through every crack in the justice system. The work was difficult and time-consuming,

and it stretched my legal knowledge and skills. I asked a student to assist me as a paralegal intern with some of the tasks and investigation. From the ongoing representation of that client and others, The WILLOW Project was formed and incorporated. Together, additional student interns and I represent multiple women also incarcerated due to violence perpetrated by their batterers and not by themselves. At the time of writing this chapter, the WILLOW Project currently represents three female clients—all abused juveniles when they were sentenced to life in prison—with the collaboration of project board members, past and current students, and volunteers.

This difficult legal work has resulted in a variety of student successes to date. Legal victories have included proving that one woman was actually entitled to a parole hearing, despite paperwork that suggested she had no such possibility; finding DNA results in another case thought long-lost; and finding case law that provided a creative avenue to potential appeal, among many other such successes. Students are energized by these cases, given that something incredibly significant is at stake. As a result, they invest many hours of work—and many more hours of careful thought—brainstorming strategies to assist their clients. In addition to direct work for WILLOW clients, student interns also examine and attempt to remedy broader issues in the justice system. Some have collaborated extensively with other Saint Louis organizations that seek to reform the criminal justice system, for instance. Other initiatives include the creation of a small on-campus student food pantry; conducting a needs drive for a formerly homeless Webster University student who is a single mother of three children; providing gifts to children with incarcerated parents during the holidays; collecting money to help a client's child pay expenses to visit his mother in prison; and conducting clothing and food drives for local domestic violence shelters. These seemingly extraneous initiatives are part of the larger WILLOW Project goal to empower our clients and those engaged in their advocacy, while encouraging community growth and understanding.

The Cases

The WILLOW Project's cases demonstrate the multifaceted issues involved in wrongful charging and conviction, and how some of these complications arise.¹

Angel Charlene Stewart was a mentally challenged teenager held captive in the sex trafficking industry for several months by two men in Iowa. Two men brutally raped and terrorized Angel and another juvenile female, threatening injury and death to Angel's one-year-old child (who was also held captive). During this time period, the men kidnapped two elderly women and murdered them—one in Iowa, one in Missouri. Angel's only thought throughout the horrific ordeal was to survive and to protect her baby from harm. When the police caught up to the group, Angel ran to them with her child in her arms. The officers on the scene considered her a victim and drove her to a local store to purchase much-needed food and diapers. It was only later that the officers were informed that she was an alleged "participant" in the murders. Angel refused to plead guilty for more than a year but, when threatened with the death penalty for first degree murder, she was eventually coerced into pleading guilty to two counts of first-degree kidnapping. Angel was unable to fully comprehend the plea bargain, since she has the mental age of a 10-year-old and is completely illiterate. At the age of 19, after meeting with her public defender for half an hour, she received two sentences of life in prison—one in Missouri and one in Iowa. Angel has been in prison for more than 20 years for murders she did not commit, and all as a direct result of being victimized herself.

Amelia Bird suffered extreme physical and sexual abuse at the hands of close family members throughout her life. She attempted on several occasions to get out of the situation and away from family violence, but was always returned to her household. As a very young teenager, Amelia resorted to drugs and an unstable and violent boyfriend, Chad Brantley, for refuge and comfort. When she was 16-years old, she complained to her then ex-boyfriend Brantley about the family's ongoing abuse. In an effort to win back Amelia's affections and to enable him to continue controlling her life, Brantley took it upon himself to enter her parents' house at night, shooting both of her parents. Her mother died and her father was badly injured. Charged along with Brantley and threatened with first-degree murder and the death penalty, Amelia eventually relented and took the plea to second-degree murder and first-degree assault. At the age of 16, she received two consecutive life sentences and will not be eligible for parole until she is at least 60-years old.

Amanda Busse lived in a household ruled by drugs, as well as physical and sexual abuse by her father and his many drug clients. After the death of her mother, 17-year-old Amanda was sold by her father and “married” to a criminally involved acquaintance in his late thirties. By all accounts, this man also routinely controlled and abused Amanda physically, sexually, and psychologically for most of her waking moments. He was feared not only by Amanda, but also by members of the local community. When a local woman was found brutally murdered, Amanda’s abusive father and husband were charged with the crime. Her husband was sentenced to life, but charges against her father were dropped. In order to get these charges dropped, Amanda’s (similarly abused) younger brother wrongfully implicated Amanda in the crime a full five years after its commission, in retaliation against Amanda after she implicated him in the sexual abuse of their nieces. Amanda was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 25 years in prison for a murder she did not commit. Her defense at the murder trial lasted for three minutes, according to the record. Since the time of her arrest, she has maintained her innocence and continuously denies being at the scene of the crime. In addition, her younger brother recanted his implication of Amanda—but when threatened by prosecutors with perjury, refused to go on the record to this effect. When Amanda realized that she would spend time in prison, she made the agonizing decision to give up her infant daughter for adoption.

Our students—and indeed everyone associated with the WILLOW Project—grapple with a plethora of questions raised by these horrifying outcomes. Why did no one look into the mental capacity of Angel Stewart? Why was the violence perpetrated against her (and threatened against her child) not compelling enough to consider when determining whether or not to charge her? Why did her assigned public defenders insist on plea bargains in two different states instead of pursuing the rightful conclusion of her innocence at trial? As to Amelia, why did no one intervene in her family situation to prevent ongoing violence against her? Why was she threatened with the death penalty, despite being only 16 years of age and thus ineligible for such an outcome? Did her initial questioning constitute unconstitutional interrogation of a minor? In Amanda’s case, without any corroborating implication or evidence, why would prosecutors charge her five years after the murder—especially taking the word of a 14-year-old boy who had recently been implicated by her in sex crimes? Finally, why would prosecutors threaten

perjury charges to a child witness who wished to recant these implicating statements?

*Clemency/Commutation/Exoneration
and the Systemic Challenges to Achieving Them*

There are four possible mechanisms by which a post-conviction incarcerated person may be able to leave prison, other than by the end of their sentence: parole, clemency, commutation, and exoneration. Parole, when an option, is the early release of a prisoner by a board on the promise of good behavior. Clemency at the state level is a disposition by the governor which moderates the severity of the punishment imposed on a convicted person. Clemency denotes an act or instance of leniency in which a sentence may be shortened or ended. Commutation is similar in its effects, shortening a criminal sentence without a declaration of innocence. Exoneration, on the other hand, is a declaration of factual innocence by a court of law (Nash 2008). The WILLOW Project seeks any and/or all of these outcomes for its current clients—frankly, whatever could and would happen most quickly. These processes are cumbersome and lengthy, logistically and politically less likely to result in positive outcomes in some states than in others. For this reason, and for multiple others, our clients and their cases provide a unique opportunity for engaging in HRE and student advocacy on both small and large scales.

The legal landscape surrounding wrongful convictions markedly changed at the turn of the twenty-first century, due in large part to unheard-of improvements in the science applied to criminal investigation and changing views on the nature of the U.S. justice system. In the early 1990s, the introduction of DNA testing changed the legal system forever. For the first time, concerned advocates were able to show conclusively that some people were factually innocent and thus were wrongfully convicted. Some resistance to the authenticity of the results and to the breadth and scope of the issues existed initially, but eventually society changed its perception of the existence of wrongful convictions (Roberts and Weathered 2009, 43). Over time, people have also realized that there are cases in which no DNA exists to be tested, but for which individuals are likewise charged and convicted wrongfully. The Innocence Project (n.d.), the primary organization responsible for more than 300 DNA exoneration, has begun to pursue such cases of factual innocence in which DNA is not present or is not available to be tested

(Eligon 2009, 1). A variety of organizations undertake similar social justice work by looking at both the microcosm of individual wrongful convictions, as well as examining the larger questions of why such convictions happen as often as they do within the U.S. justice system. Issues leading to incarceration in these cases are many and varied, but often begin with poverty, oppression, and lack of access to resources within the system.

The WILLOW Project takes on this form of social justice work, but it is unique in its collaboration between students and legal professionals. Undergraduate students operate alongside the legal team to represent survivors of violence who have been charged and convicted with crimes—often along with the actual perpetrators of the crimes. Project interns look at macro issues that affect these cases and attempt to identify ways to combat resulting injustices. Systemic macro problems include: issues of policing appropriately, lack of resources for public defenders, lack of parole board transparency in decision-making, lack of consideration of domestic violence and its ramifications (in law generally and in the charging of crimes), societal perceptions of domestic violence survivors, and many others. All of these difficulties engage student interest and are worthy of discussion and extensive research. These circumstances provide students with a wide range of opportunities to explore lobbying and networking with legislators and other partners, as well as to market the project and its cases, to educate the public, and to show inconsistencies in criminal justice through various means. The students' creativity in approaching these problems is critical to our advocacy.

THE CLINICAL EDUCATION MODEL AND STUDENT INTERNSHIPS

Webster University has long emphasized the importance and long-term advantages of experiential learning for all of our students. Many of our degrees and programs require hands-on learning, taught by practitioners in the field of study. Our legal studies program, for example, includes American Bar Association (ABA) accredited degrees and certificates taught according to ABA requirements that demand students learn legal knowledge, as well as know how to apply it. The traditional legal studies internship program at Webster has existed for more than three decades; it is an elective within both the graduate and undergraduate degrees. Many students through the years have been placed in law firms, government offices, and in-house at corporations. This type of legal exposure is

interesting and makes the day-to-day study of law and its theory relevant, and it is also helpful to students in acquiring future jobs. The WILLOW Project is an expansion of this traditional internship into a more clinical model. It offers students a chance to work in a non-traditional setting, but with the same opportunity to apply knowledge acquired in their college education to clients and their cases. All students are required to meet with me, their internship advisor, on a regular basis to discuss assignments in a collaborative way. The internship course requires a set number of contact hours with me, as well as a set number of hours doing practical work.

The clinical model is often used at the law school level, as supported by ABA accreditation. Most of law school education is based on studying case law and statutes, through the use of hypothetical case analysis and use of Socratic methodology. On the other hand, in many law schools, students also engage in the supervised practice of law in various clinical programs, usually offering legal assistance to low-income clients in order to gain useful practice skills. Clinics offer experiential learning, vastly different from other modes of law school teaching (Beck 2004, footnote 55). While some law school clinics exclusively do research and writing on the law, most represent clients in ongoing conflicts. Other disciplines mirror the practicum component offered by law school clinics; counseling and medicine, for example, both require work in some type of practicum where work can be done and also observed.

The WILLOW Project is unique in that it utilizes a clinical internship model at the undergraduate level. Students from a variety of academic disciplines contribute through these internships; while legal studies students do traditional legal work, students from programs—including international human rights; sociology; criminology; communications; women, gender, and sexuality studies; computer science; film and television production; and business—assist in helping clients by contributing their individual skills. To the extent possible, students take the lead in determining which aspects of the representation they wish to pursue (although naturally there are some academic deadlines that may constrain options). Some students learn how to appropriately and ethically gather evidence and investigate cases while gaining greater understanding of substantive issues of law. Other students study domestic violence and similar other societal problems that have impacted WILLOW project clients. We talk to our incarcerated clients about aspects of the crimes, as well as about issues related to their daily lives within the prison system.

In addition, interns interview a wide variety of people—including individuals related to probation and parole processes, criminal defense lawyers, and judges—in order to better understand the coercive nature of the plea bargaining system. Student interns also do a significant amount of writing, including letters, petitions, briefs, summaries of interviews, file notes, speeches, and more. They constantly strategize approaches to press conferences, engage in speech writing, utilize advocacy skills, negotiate media relationships, and undertake public relations work on behalf of clients. Finally, students have orchestrated social media fundraising campaigns, raised awareness of our organization, and even filed paperwork to gain both corporate and non-profit statuses.

Identifying Key Partners In/Out of the University

To support the vital work of the WILLOW Project, identifying key partners both inside and outside of the university is incredibly important. Within the Webster community, four former students and I formed a decision-making board of directors to discuss and address all facets of the project, including our clients' needs and the student internships. These discussions include collaborative and creative reassessments of our approach, group strategizing, raising new issues, reporting on student work, creating and doling out assignments, and identifying what research needs to be done and who should do it. When we meet with students, the board attempts to create a safe and collaborative work environment, give constructive suggestions, address personal issues and interpersonal conflicts of various kinds, and address ethical dilemmas that arise in legal practice. Professors and staff members from other university departments also assist with the project; some faculty members with nursing and counseling expertise, among others, continue to brainstorm ways to lend their knowledge and skills—and the knowledge and skills of their students—to expand the WILLOW Project's reach. We consider interdisciplinary opportunities to expand our work continually, remaining open to new types of courses and research to support our project goals. Other university partners have included the university's global marketing office, which has provided meaningful public relations support to increase the visibility of the WILLOW Project's work. In some cases, faculty "professional development" funds—usually earmarked for traditional academic conference participation—have been authorized to help defray the costs of pro bono legal representation. All of these university collaborations

help to support this non-profit organization and its unique approaches to HRE and social justice work.

Outside of the university, The WILLOW Project fosters partnerships and relationships with fellow legal professionals and journalists. For instance, we joined with attorneys and families of 12 other incarcerated and abused women who seek clemency from the governor of Missouri in a group called the Community Coalition for Clemency. This collaboration of like-minded individuals has held joint press conferences and spoken in forums of various kinds about our mutual goals for our clients. The coalition successfully gained the attention of a local state representative, who personally championed our cause, forging a bond across party lines with 26 other female legislators who spoke to the governor's office on behalf of our clients. She was also critical in helping us gain an audience with close aides of the governor, affording us an opportunity to give overviews of the coalition's cases for their consideration. Two of the coalition's clients were recently released from prison through these efforts. In addition, concerned journalists have written about our clients' cases and stories in a variety of publications. The benefits of engaging people and institutions with this work are immeasurable to students and to the clients' representation. The publication of articles about our clients and about wrongful convictions generally helps heighten awareness among members of the public, including key players such as legislators and others (Warden 2002, 803). When people gain awareness about the flaws in the criminal justice system, they may then wish to support our cause through letter-writing, lobbying, and other forms of public pressure on decision-makers. Students benefit, as well; WILLOW interns and volunteers have spoken directly to journalists and had conversations with legislators, lawyers, judges, and others to collect case information and evidence. I have witnessed intern students gain self-confidence and assertiveness, while also achieving new insights and learning better approaches to investigative techniques.

Pedagogical Approaches

Because education is of central importance to the WILLOW Project's approach, careful attention to pedagogical structures is necessary to successfully balance our legal goals with our HRE ones. Because our students come from diverse backgrounds and study in different academic disciplinary fields, some of them are ill-equipped to understand and to deal with many of issues related to client representation. In the interest

of filling in some knowledge gaps, I created a 2000-level course about wrongful convictions entitled “The Sliding Scales of Justice” to complement the clinical internship. The course is designed primarily to study the U.S. criminal justice system, but the inclusion of the WILLOW Project cases in this dialogue makes the knowledge far more real and personal. This class examines the legal system broadly, including structural flaws that may lead to incarceration. It includes information about domestic violence and sex/gender issues, as well as how identities and varying backgrounds impact access to justice. The class studies multiple cases of wrongful conviction, which leads to discussions about how to strategize needed reforms and how to address violations of equality before the law. This is a crucial component in the education of the interns, but hopefully it expands all students’ personal growth and critical thinking; notably, students from across the university enroll in this course and it is not limited to only internship students. Indeed, students are invited to share their individual perspectives, interests, and talents in an end-of-semester presentation that encourages them to pass along their knowledge to others. Class participants have created many unique and original projects, ranging from more traditional research Powerpoint presentations to creative artistic endeavors.

From early on, it also became clear that supervision of the WILLOW Project’s student interns is extremely time consuming and difficult for one faculty advisor to manage. The scale of the project and its vision were initially too big, so it had to constantly be renegotiated by its board and by student interns. In response to feedback—and a steep learning curve—we have started utilizing volunteer supervisors, such as board members and willing university faculty and staff. Most of the supervisors are non-lawyers, so their supervision includes assigning tasks to the interns as I designate, and then following up with them to answer questions and facilitate communication with me. Since only attorneys may give legal advice and advocate directly for the clients, the assignments must be overseen by myself (and my lawyer faculty colleagues), but that does not preclude the assistance of others to ensure consistent follow up and mentoring of students. We also initiated a basic instructional training program for orientation purposes. This program requires interns to self-assess skills and interests prior to beginning work with the project in order to better help supervisors (and myself) place and supervise undergraduates throughout their internship experiences. To help facilitate this, we continue to create short-term projects related to our broader goals,

often focusing on results that students can immediately see. Examples of past short-term projects include letter-writing campaigns on behalf of our clients, as well as end-of-semester supplies and clothing drives for women and children currently living in domestic violence shelters. This helps students remain focused in lengthy legal representations and feel like they are actively participating in social justice work. Achieving short-term objectives provides a type of satisfaction that some students need, as opposed to making incremental progress in the very long-range objective of getting our clients out of prison. Furthermore, these projects give students a personal stake in outcomes.

One important outcome of student internships and participation in short-term projects is a broadened understanding of how the legal system, social justice, and rights protection function in practice. Engaging with different perspectives helps expose flaws or weaknesses in our decision-making—which is important when your audience is not a jury or a judge, but rather is a lay person in the court of public opinion. The differences between narrative advocacy in the field of law and factual neutrality in the field of journalism, for example, are sometimes demonstrated by professional journalists who write articles about individual clients. While such articles generally benefit our clients, differences in perspectives (and priorities) are important points to consider in targeting one’s “audience” and in utilizing outside collaborators. As my team learns these important lessons and gains valuable input from various partners, we are able to move forward with more complex initiatives and expand opportunities to advocate for our clients. In this regard, the content expertise of individual faculty supervisors has also benefited both our students and the project overall. Students who prefer project-related research (instead of hands-on experience such as public relations or event coordination, for example) benefit from the supervision of faculty members with complementary research expertise. While faculty members may not have the time to directly volunteer with the WILLOW Project, their support for student research—and in turn, for our project initiatives—helps ensure the usefulness and accuracy of research outputs prepared by students.

Another important learning opportunity for students stems from our need to maintain client contact. WILLOW Project clients are housed in two facilities located hours away from campus, making prison visits difficult. Every semester, a student is assigned to communicate with the clients regularly, largely through written paper correspondence (which is

the cheapest, easiest, and best mechanism to maintain client confidentiality). Some of the correspondence is about the legal issues and approaches that we undertake, always in the collaborative mode of asking the clients' opinions. (Obviously these women know their cases best, sometimes having given them decades of thought, so engaging them in the discussion of how best to represent their interests is simply smart lawyering.) Notably, students are required to (and, in my experience, want to) show their personal interest in clients as individuals, not just as subjects of academic and legal discussion. Clients want and need to write to us about their experiences and progress, about their relationships inside and outside of prison, about evidentiary leads they may think of in their cases, and more. The students, in turn, are given the opportunity to communicate with clients about progress we are (or are not) making, about publicity and visibility of the project and their cases, and general updates. One really interesting aspect of the communication is the need for both sides to participate in educating each other. Clients tell students about their daily lives in prison, both positive and negative. Students learn directly about unfair practices and policies within the system, as well as how they affect inmates, their families, their friends, and professionals interested in helping. Clients, who often do not know how to view or verbalize what has happened to them throughout their lives, begin to understand that societal systems have failed them. As they start to understand the ramifications of lifelong domestic violence for themselves and others, they are often empowered to re-think their self-images and goals.

Ethical Concerns

The representation of the WILLOW Project's clients raises many ethical issues. For me, a major goal is to prioritize the ideals of social justice within our work and to incorporate human rights-based thinking in every aspect of project implementation. In theory and in practice, any human rights endeavor which attempts to better the human condition should be cognizant of incorporating human rights ideals into fundamental structures (see International Human Rights Network, n.d.). Specifically and significantly, wrongful conviction projects should not re-create the power structures which originally disabled and disenfranchised individuals. In order to avoid this, we must consistently re-evaluate the real-world learning experience—which requires creativity and the constant assessment of the implementation of our ideals. Avoiding the

trap of re-creating existing power structures is especially difficult when dealing with female prison population members and prison systems overall. All of our clients are incarcerated due to (and as a result of) horrific violence perpetrated against them, imprisoned in all-female institutions, and challenged with poverty and lifetimes of domestic abuse. This area of the law lacks guideposts to some extent, since incarcerated women are less likely—in the legal world of innocence and wrongful convictions—to acquire post-conviction legal representation (Free and Ruesink 2016, vii–viii). To educate our student interns as interconnected “global citizens” requires us to empower both clients and students in the creation of a more socially just and equitable world. To that end, it is our responsibility to constantly re-assess the impacts and ramifications of our choices regarding client representation.

Participation in the WILLOW Project is often exciting and educational for students, but it is important to remember that their work is not just a theoretical study of wrongful conviction and wrongful incarceration; there are living, breathing women relying on this pedagogy. Commutation, clemency, exoneration—even parole—are unlikely outcomes in these cases. The philosophical debate about whether or not it constitutes re-victimization to raise clients’ hopes wages a battle in my head every day. Despite client assurances that they each understand the emotional risks of failure, hope in the face of unlikely success may be a very dangerous thing for them. Furthermore, we have to be aware of the impacts of constantly re-visiting their personal stories of violence. Certainly, we do not want to re-traumatize them. All of our choices have to be made in light of these considerations. It is thus crucial to create a sustainable structure that includes attention to human rights in every aspect of the planning, without giving power only to the WILLOW team members. This is critical. There must be client empowerment in the plan from the start, especially in situations where it is difficult to assess whether there will ultimately be any tangible benefit to clients through the representation.

With years of experience working within this model as both an educator and an attorney, I am forced to question several points—and I encourage my students to do the same: If our clients get out of prison, obviously that will be a measurable positive outcome—but what if that never happens? Even if we are fortunate enough to get them out of prison; what about their lives from that moment on? Our clients often have dangerous family members and have lived in social structures that

they will need to learn to navigate differently. The abuse they experienced throughout their lives took away their personal power and they need to learn how to re-gain it. This disempowerment is also exacerbated by the lengthy sentences WILLOW Project clients have served; at the time of writing, Amelia has been in prison for 13 years, Amanda for 10 years, and Angel for longer than she ever lived outside of prison. This kind of “institutionalization” may affect a person’s ability to function in the world outside of prison.² Prisons need to provide better training and skill development for all incarcerated people, especially for those who have been vulnerable throughout their lives and need to learn how to reclaim personal power. However, organizations such as the WILLOW Project must also take personal responsibility for the emotional well-being of clients, both during and post-incarceration. How do we make that happen?

CREATING SIMILAR EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES ELSEWHERE

The WILLOW Project’s undergraduate-level internships and clinical experiences were a natural progression for me, inspired by law school clinics throughout the United States. Public interest in wrongful convictions continues to grow, thanks to the proliferation of related books, factual and fictional television and cinematic drama, podcasts, blogs, and more. Clemency is rife with experiential learning possibilities—and it is certainly broad enough to encompass learning by students from many academic disciplines, not limited to pre-law or legal studies undergraduates. My hope is that other institutions will replicate such opportunities for students, in part influenced by our experiences with the WILLOW Project in Saint Louis. To begin, I recommend choosing a theme or topic that resonates with your students—and your faculty—and that will allow your community to engage with issues of social justice and human rights. To that end, I close this chapter with various starting points that may lead to comparable opportunities at other institutions for a variety of undergraduate populations:

- A taxpayer clinic for low income and/or elderly persons and/or veterans: Accounting and business students, for instance, could help prepare individual tax returns, as well as answer tax and accounting questions.

- A non-profit organization clinic for low-income entrepreneurs or non-profits: Business majors might do research and/or make phone calls about tax liability, 501c3 status, and the maintenance of corporate status for non-profits.
- A public benefits access clinic: Legal studies students, social work students, and others could help people fill out government forms for public benefits, as well as assist low-income persons in gaining access to and maintaining information for continuing benefits.
- A domestic violence assistance clinic: Students focusing their studies on issues related to women's rights and gender issues would be particularly interested in connecting individuals with necessary resources and confidential referrals.
- A prison programming and education clinic: Education students and others could provide lesson plans and implement programming for incarcerated people. One example comes from my own institution, where Professor Margot Sempreora of the English Department participates in a performing arts theater and poetry performance program, entitled Prison Performing Arts (see Prison Performing Arts, n.d.).
- A "one stop shop" where social work students and others assist low-income individuals in determining what social service resources exist in their area and how to access them.
- A poverty clinic: Students in counseling, nursing, paralegal, and social work programs could offer direct on-site, supervised services appropriate to their disciplines and education levels.
- A lobbying clinic: Students studying public relations and marketing, media communications, TV/audio visual, and political science could make themselves available to non-profits in order to undertake PR work, to engage in letter-writing campaigns, to create websites and blogs, and more. Students from various disciplines might also lobby state and federal legislators to raise awareness about various social justice and rights issues.
- A creative writing or art clinic: Film, English, art, and theater students could create various artistic works—including plays, films, and exhibits—to highlight social justice issues.
- A criminal justice system or prison reform clinic: Journalism, sociology, criminology, cultural anthropology, and legal studies students could research and write articles for publication (such as op-ed pieces in newspapers) and raise public visibility about human rights issues.

This list of possible undergraduate experiences offers only a few starting points for expanding the social justice work currently being done by the WILLOW Project. Clearly many more possibilities exist and will likewise provide unique opportunities to apply HRE across university disciplines. Students want to—and, I believe, need to—apply their learning to social justice causes in order to fully understand their capacity to make a difference in the world. The WILLOW Project illustrates how undergraduate students can make valuable contributions to this work while engaging in HRE; such advocacy and representation are often difficult and frustrating, but they offer important lessons about shortcomings in the U.S. criminal justice system—and possibilities for facilitating positive change with the goal of protecting human rights.

NOTES

1. Although the clients' names and our legal representation of them is a matter of public record, we also have their written permission to use their full legal names in this article and in other non-legal documents and publications.
2. The term “institutionalization” describes the process by which incarcerated people are shaped and transformed by the institutional environment. Examples of institutionalization may include post-traumatic stress, diminished sense of self-worth and value, dependence on institution structures, and the internalization of prison culture (Haney 2001).

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