



Preparing Tomorrow's Rural Lawyers: Student Success and Community Impact

[Transcript]

Announcer:

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in the following multimedia content are the views and opinions of the individuals speaking and do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of the Law School Admission Council, Inc., its trustees, or members.

[bright music]

LSAC. Rural Access Initiative webinar series, "Preparing Tomorrow's Rural Lawyers: Student Success and Community Impact." Introduction by Sudha Setty, president and CEO of LSAC. Moderators: Kellye Y. Testy, CEO of the Association of American Law Schools, and Dean Christiana Ochoa, Indiana University Maurer School of Law. Panelists: Dean Elizabeth Kronk Warner, University of Utah S.J. Quinney College of Law; Dean Richard Moberly, University of Nebraska College of Law; Dean Patricia Roberts, St. Mary's University School of Law; Dean Rebecca Zietlow, University of Toledo College of Law; Dean Leigh Saufley, University of Maine School of Law. Recorded September 16, 2026.

Sudha Setty:

Hi, and good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us for this important webinar. My name is Sudha Setty. I am the president and CEO of the Law School Admission Council, and I want to welcome you all here today. We are so pleased to be collaborating with AALS, the Association of American Law Schools, on many aspects of a rural access to justice initiative, where we're working with chief justices, tribal courts, law schools, bar associations, and lots of other groups and individuals. I think we all know that no one entity can achieve success when it comes to a complicated issue like rural access. So the information sharing and collective work that we're doing is essential in this space.

Expanding access to justice is at the heart of all of the organizations' missions for us and for everyone else here today, and so we're really excited to be working together on these initiatives. This is the second of three webinars designed to provide a foundation for a wide array of rural access efforts in the months and years ahead. Our first webinar in August focused on expanding pathways to law school for rural communities, and it's available on demand on our website. We've put the link in the chat. And our third webinar, which will be held on October 14th from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m. Eastern Time, is focused on innovative ways to provide legal services in rural areas, featuring organizations that are doing that work and bringing lawyers to those communities. So that registration link will be in the chat as well.

Today, we're focusing on law schools. We know from research that we've done that many, many law schools are very interested in rural access to justice. Lots of them have career-focused programming to support law students in exploring rural practice. Many of them have opportunities for law students to engage in research and coursework, and there's already a lot of important, exciting work happening, and today is an opportunity to learn even more. So with that, I'll turn it over to Kellye Testy, CEO of AALS, who will be leading today's discussion, co-moderating with Dean Christy Ochoa on what law schools are doing to prepare law students of today to be future rural lawyers. Thank you, Kellye and Christy.

Kellye Testy:

Thank you so much, President Setty. It's wonderful to be with all of you today, and I want to thank you for joining us to learn more about rural justice and all that our law schools are doing. Big thanks to LSAC, not only to their wonderful President Setty, but also to Angela Winfield and Lara Fonseca, who have been wonderful in organizing these webinars and moving this important area forward. I'm really pleased to be able to be here today to talk about rural justice and what our law schools are doing because I'm just so proud of what all the deans across our nation are doing in leadership in this important area.

And this isn't new for the deans. For over a decade, the deans in many states have been working on issues of rural justice, and it's a complex problem. It will take many people to solve it. It's also a problem that is perfect for law, and I've always said that getting a law degree is like getting a degree in complex problem-solving. But it's one our legal health in rural areas is not separate from our health in other areas like medicine and economics and social health, but many times some of those areas are easier to see so clearly, and sometimes legal health is not, but it's also a major problem in rural areas. And so I just want to say a big shout-out and thanks to the deans across our nation who have stepped up to help lead in this area. And you're going to hear today about a lot of those exciting programs that are developing.

About two years ago, AALS began a collective of deans to try and spur this area, and you'll meet today some of the leaders there. One of those leaders is Christy Ochoa from Indiana University Maurer School of Law, and I'm really proud to introduce her today. I'm an alum myself of that law school, a very proud one, and also someone who grew up in rural Indiana. So I really understand the need for access to justice in rural areas. Dean Ochoa, thank you so much for being with us. I'll turn this to you and look forward to moderating with you today.

Christiana Ochoa:

Thank you, Kellye. It's my absolute pleasure to be here with all of you today as well. And I also want to thank LSAC and AALS for the leadership and infrastructure they've provided to all of the deans that are very interested in making progress on this issue within our own law schools, within our own states, and together collectively. It's been a really wonderful couple of years working under your leadership, Kellye, and also the leadership that Rebecca Zietlow has provided in pulling together the deans' working group on rural justice, rural access to justice initiatives. And so, really, thank you so much to AALS for the leadership they provided and also to LSAC for the infrastructure they're providing for these conversations. They will certainly help us not just now, but well into the future.

I wanted to just briefly make sure that you knew Kellye Testy obviously is the executive director and chief executive officer of the Association of American Law Schools, but she has also been the president of LSAC before this post and, before that, has spent most of her adult life in Washington, a state that has significant rural access to justice concerns. And as she said, she grew up in rural Indiana. That feature unites many of us on this event today. I wanted to introduce to you the other deans that are on this panel today.

Elizabeth Kronk Warner is the Jefferson and Rita Fordham Presidential Dean and Professor of Law at the S.J. Quinney College of Law at the University of Utah. Dean Warner, Kronk Warner is a nationally recognized expert in the intersection of environmental and Indian law, and she is a citizen of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians and has served as an appellate judge for the tribe and is a district judge for the Prairie Band Potawatomi Tribe. These issues are near and dear to her heart for reasons that are surely clear in her bio.

Rebecca Zietlow, as I mentioned, has been the organizer of the deans' working group on rural access to justice initiatives. And in addition to that, she serves as university professor at the University of Toledo College of Law, where she teaches constitutional law, federal courts, and constitutional litigation. She is a resident and grew up in Bloomington, Indiana, as well, and so knows the Indiana legal deserts problem well, but that problem is present in her home state right now in Ohio also.

Dean Richard Moberly has served as the University of Nebraska's 17th dean since 2017. And Nebraska, in addition to being another location with significant rural spaces and rural access to justice concerns, is also going to be the host institution and the host dean for our convening in November. And we thank him very much for that leadership and support for the national convening that we will be having. He is a formidable academic in his own right, primarily on whistleblowing issues and national security whistleblower and code of ethics concerns.

And then Leigh Saufley became the dean at the University of Maine Law School. She is the eighth dean at the Maine Law School, which has been in existence since 1962. She's had a distinguished career in public service with substantial work experience, both within the judicial system and also within the U.S. Veterans Administration. And so, has been interested in these issues, obviously not just during her term as dean, but is also a Maine resident and has been educated in Maine throughout and is very connected to these issues in her home state as well. So thank you to all of the panelists for being with us today.

And with that, I want to just jump right in. We've got a lot to talk about today. And Elizabeth Kronk Warner, I will start with you, Dean Kronk Warner. I wanted to maybe zoom out to about 30,000 feet, really, just to try to give us a big picture of the work that is being done within law schools on the issue of rural access to justice and legal deserts in the states where we are and also nationally. And let me just ask you a couple questions, and I'll just turn it over to you to give you a good stretch of time to speak to the audience. If folks were just coming to this issue today, wondering what it is that law schools are doing and maybe even believing that we're not doing a lot, what would they be missing? And then, related to that, what are the principal ways that you see law schools around the country trying to build pathways into rural practice, and where do you see the most activity and innovation?

Elizabeth Kronk Warner: Great. Thank you so much. And Boozhoo and Anishinaabe, hello, friends. A big thank you to Christy and Kellye for moderating today's session. Christy told you a lot, or Dean Ochoa told you a lot, about Kellye, but she herself is a tremendous leader in this area, and we're going to talk a little bit about what Indiana is doing. And, of course, I also want to thank LSAC and AALS for giving us time today. And I would be remiss if I didn't say that I'm coming to you live from Utah, which is named after the Ute Tribe, and we have a significant relationship with Indigenous peoples here at the University of Utah. But to my first slide, if I may, to answer your question, Dean Ochoa, if folks thought that that was the case, that would be untrue. This is not a new frontier for law schools. There are many law schools across the country, and it would be impossible for me to give an example from every single law school because so many law schools are doing great work in this space. So I've just picked a couple of examples to give an idea of the scope of the work that is happening

here. So law schools are actively engaged. We're seeing law schools engage around a couple of different categories, such as clinical education, pro bono outreach, outreach through technological innovation, pipelines and incubators, and financial support. So those are kind of the broad buckets.

And just to give you an introductory thought, we have over 60 legal incubator programs nationwide, and CUNY, the City University of New York, is credited with really starting the first of these legal rural outreach incubators. Another great example of how law schools are tackling this problem is through pro bono outreach, and I've given you here an example from Tulane Law School, where students, through pro bono clinics and externships, many of which focus on rural issues, have contributed over 600,000 pro bono hours, which is truly remarkable. And then also, our top 20 law schools, Yale, Stanford, Berkeley, Penn, NYU, University of Texas, are all running loan forgiveness programs or providing financial support to really support students who are working in these areas. So that's just a couple of examples of what's happening nationwide.

Now, to your second question, if I could have my next slide, specifically as to what type of innovation is happening across the country, I give you a couple more examples here. So one of the things that is certainly happening in law schools across the country is this idea of really evolving and creating immersive rural pipelines, this idea that we need sustained immersion. It's not enough to merely show up in a community and say, "Hey, I'm here to help, but I'm leaving tomorrow," to really have those deep connections. And we can look to a couple of examples about that. So at the University of Maine, and we'll hear from Dean Saufley a little bit later, each semester they've worked collaboratively with Fort Kent to create living opportunities for their students in that rural community so they can live and work there.

The University of Nebraska, which Dean Moberly leads, recruits students from rural backgrounds and guarantees their admission. And we know that this group of folks is the most likely to return to rural America to do work, so really building that pipeline. Similarly, the University of Idaho has their "Heritage Project," where they are actually able to fund internships in the summer, again, so that students can have this living and working experience in rural communities. And last, but certainly not least, we have the University of Arkansas at Bowen, which runs their "Rural Practice Incubator," which, again, a long, immersive 18-month runway where they have a whole wraparound service for the students of mentoring, case management support, and stipend to really allow for the students to live and work in those communities. If I could have my next slide, please.

We also have a really kind of new and innovative model, which Dean Zietlow might talk about a little bit later, which is two schools collaborating in this space. So we have the University of Toledo, excuse me, and Ohio Northern University, who are actively collaborating in Ohio to address this very problem. So you can see here on the slide

that the University of Toledo is serving several counties, and then Ohio Northern serves other counties. And together, they're really able to serve a big portion of the need, certainly not all the need, but a big portion of the need in Ohio. And they've had about 40 law students a year reaching out and doing this work for 720 clients. Shout-out to the Ohio State Bar Foundation, who actually funded this with an approximately 1.5 million grant. Next slide, please.

And where we're really seeing important reform is, first, on regulatory reform, looking beyond the JD to see what else can be done. So here in Utah, we developed a regulatory sandbox for nontraditional legal service providers. Arizona has provided licensed paraprofessional programs. Washington State has their Limited License Legal Technician model. And even though they're no longer admitting new individuals, this does remain a helpful model. And then, of course, Dean Ochoa, you're familiar with Indiana's "Allied Legal Professionals Pilot," which allows for certified nonlawyers to handle limited matters under attorney supervision. And these are areas where, yes, the law schools are collaborating with states, but this is a good example of a partnership that goes beyond the law school between the state and the law schools. Similarly, our law schools are innovating in terms of technology.

We have the Vanderbilt program "Day in Court." We have Duke and Vanderbilt, who have built a chatbot to help folks with the use of AI, and certainly Stanford and the NAACP's "Housing Navigator" for Individuals Facing Instability. Next slide, please. But it's important, your question asked what gaps remain, and that, I want to highlight that this is a professionalism desert and not just a legal aid desert. So it's not just about, and you and President Testy mentioned this, it's not just about lawyers. It's about a professionalism desert in many of our rural communities.

So we need to think about this as two buckets: access to legal services and how law schools can help access to legal services and improve that, and then the physical presence of lawyers. And it may be that we can do more on providing access than we might be able to do in terms of physical presence of lawyers, which is harder. It's slower. It mirrors other professionalism gaps that we're seeing, like in the medical area. Next slide, please.

Also, we know that although many of our students would really love to have an amazing career and opportunity to live in rural America, the economics simply are not working. We know that 41% of counties in the United States are legal deserts, where we have fewer than one lawyer per 1,000 residents. So this is not a Utah problem or an Indiana problem or Ohio problem. This is all of us together, but yet the average median debt you can see there is 137-plus for our law students graduating, and rural attorneys typically make substantially less than their urban counterparts. So a lot of our students and recent graduates who are very interested in this, just simply, the economics don't work out for them to move to rural America. Next slide, please.

Now, what are some of the gaps that we can really partner together to work on? Distance and broadband, technology. We need specialized agricultural law, as many of these communities need assistance there. As has been talked about in this series, we need to collaborate with our tribal and Indigenous communities. We also need to shore up funding. This is a situation that no one law school can solve alone, so we need to work on that. Last slide, please.

And I just want to highlight that this is a shared project. Law schools are engaged and making a lot of progress. We're taking a portfolio approach in these different categories, but there's a lot left to be done, and we can't do it alone, so we look forward to collaborating with others in this field. Back to our moderators. Thank you so much.

Kellye:

Elizabeth, thank you so much for that wonderful overview, and you covered a lot of ground, and we're really grateful for that. So thanks for your inspired leadership. I want to call Rebecca Zietlow now, Dean of Toledo, who so many people referred to already. And Rebecca, I wanted to ask you to talk a little bit about clinics. Students love clinics, experiential education, hands-on learning. Sometimes they're hard to sustain, though, so how do we think about clinical education within the context of rural justice?

Rebecca Zietlow:

Sure, Kellye. Clinics are one of the approaches that law schools are taking to try to address the rural access issue. It's an initiative that combines education, community service, and increasing access to legal services for people who live in rural areas. Clinics can serve as a pipeline for new lawyers who want to practice in rural areas and help to launch the careers of those lawyers. Summer externships also give students a chance to live in the rural communities and learn to know those communities, as well as learn substantive law that's essential to legal practice. For example, at the University at Buffalo School of Law, the "Rural Justice Initiative" connects students with internships at government offices in rural areas. The University of Nebraska and the University of South Dakota provide paid externships in rural areas. And these are just some examples of externship programs that clinics are doing, that law schools are doing.

The legal clinics in rural locations enable students to represent rural clients. Some law schools, such as South Dakota, Wyoming, and others, are located in rural areas. So right off the bat, their clinical programs are representing clients. And I should add that all law schools have a requirement. All ABA-accredited law schools have a requirement for experiential learning and have clinical programs. But as Kellye sort of hinted at earlier, clinics are very expensive. Funding them is not easy. We need a high number of faculty per student for the ratio. So we're doing what we can to expand those opportunities.

We've already mentioned the University of Maine "Rural Practice Clinic" in Fort Kent, Maine, where students spend the whole summer in the rural community. Another example is the Arizona State University Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law "Indian Legal Clinic," which enables students to represent clients in tribal, state, and federal courts, which, of course, tend to be in more rural areas. Elizabeth kindly mentioned our "Lawyers vs. Justice Clinic" that is a partnership with the Ohio Northern Pettit College of Law, which combines clinical programs with fellowships for new attorneys starting in rural practice and will enable them to serve as mentors for our students at the same time as they are starting out their practice and starting up a client base. So that's another approach that's being taken.

So how do we make these efforts sustainable beyond a semester or a grant? One of the things that Dean Moberly is going to talk about, Richard's going to be talking about, partnerships, and I think this is essential, right? The gold standard for clinics is, of course, law schools paying for them out of their hard funding rather than grant-funded clinics. So that's certainly going to be a goal to increase those types of clinical programs, but also working with — as we have done with the Ohio Bar Association, with the Ohio Bar Foundation to increase these partnerships. Fellowships for new attorneys is something that we are doing through our clinic, but also the Ohio State legislature has enacted loan forgiveness, and in other states that has happened as well for students that are graduating to help, again, to get the start because, always, starting out, these tend to be small practices, as Elizabeth mentioned, and that's going to be really important for sustainability as well.

We, as law school deans, welcome these kinds of discussions about partnerships and other innovative methods that we can use, and we're really looking forward to the convening that will take place in Nebraska in November, where we will be meeting with other folks from bar associations, et cetera, to try to develop and continue those programs. Regardless of what we do, I do think that clinical programs are an essential part. They're an essential part of access to justice in general and certainly rural access as well. Thank you. I'm going to turn it back over to the monitors.

Christiana:

Thank you so very much, Dean Zietlow. That was very, very helpful, really, really interesting. And obviously, the work the clinics are doing, particularly your clinics, is very inspiring. I wanted to turn now to Dean Richard Moberly. And again, I just wanted to pose a set of questions to you and just let you have the floor for a little while. And what we really wanted to think about was the kinds of partnerships that law schools need in order to be able to have the most significant impact.

So what kind of partners do we need to have involved if a rural pipeline program such as the one that you have at your law school is going to eventually lead to actual rural

practice down the road? And what do we know from your experience in Nebraska about working with the undergraduate population and institutions, with the profession, with employers, with the courts, and with the communities that are ultimately the recipients of these legal services? And then, finally, what would you share with us about the role that rural employers and communities themselves have to play in recruitment and retention and attracting young lawyers to their communities?

Richard Moberly:

Thanks, Dean Ochoa, and thanks again to LSAC and AALS for hosting this webinar, and we are excited to welcome all of you to Lincoln in six or so weeks. So let's talk about partnerships. And, of course, some of the partners depend on where you are in your particular region or the type of pipeline program that you might implement, and then what phase of the pipeline you were talking about. So if we think about the pipeline as before law school, of course, undergraduate colleges and universities would be crucial partners. Law schools want to reach out to those institutions whose undergrads would be interested in law school.

For example, Washburn Law School in Kansas has a law early admission program where they partner with regional colleges to recruit and support undergraduates. And Washburn worked with those institutions to develop three-plus-three programs so students can graduate in six years with less debt, and they also provide scholarships for students in those programs. So those undergraduate colleges are crucial. Lawyers in local communities will often serve as coaches for mock trial teams at both the high school and the college level, and those teams are often feeders for students interested in law school. And in Nebraska, the mock trial program in rural areas is very strong. And finally, before law school, courts can actually play an important and visible role. In Mississippi, the court system launched law camps for high schoolers in cities across the state, where students meet lawyers, they observe them in court, and they participate in debates and moot court.

In Nebraska, our Supreme Court and Court of Appeals often hold arguments all over the state in high school and college auditoriums, and that provides another way for students to see law in action and inspire them to think about law school and practicing law. During law school, once those undergrads become law students, you heard Elizabeth say that students need to be exposed to rural practice, and Rebecca mentioned clinical work and summer internships, and those are crucial, and partners can really help with those experiences. You heard about the University of Idaho College of Law and their "Idaho Heritage Project" that was provided with financial support for students from a donor. You also heard about the University at Buffalo School of Law, the "Rural Justice Initiative," and that is connections with New York counties through internships and other programs there. For those programs to work, you need to have partners with the local and state bar associations. They're crucial to connect lawyers in local communities who

provide those work experiences and show law students what a law practice may look like.

And then, once again, even for law students, courts are excellent partners because they have consistent work and they're physically located in rural areas. The New Mexico School of Law, for example, partnered with state courts to create judicial externships for law students in rural counties. And during the 10 weeks of the externship, students conduct legal research and writing, they observe court proceedings, they work closely with mentor judges, and students who successfully complete the program receive compensation. They have a \$5,000 stipend, a \$4,000 housing stipend, and tuition reimbursement of up to \$1,800. Some schools are innovating in how to bring legal education to students in rural places so they don't even need to relocate to come to law school. Seattle University School of Law has created what they call "Hybrid Hubs" with rural colleges and campuses that provide support for JD students in their part-time hybrid online program. So they have programming and other services for JD students at those regional schools where they develop relationships and have maintained their connections in their rural places.

And then, finally, after graduation, the list of partners can expand even further. State legislators and state leaders need to understand the scope of the issues so they can consider government help. We talk about loan repayment or forgiveness or other incentives for law students to consider rural practice. Legal aid and other nonprofit organizations can be great partners. You heard Elizabeth talk about some of the work they're doing to create technological solutions with Duke and Vanderbilt and Stanford. Some law schools have partnered with state bars to recruit new attorneys. The State Bar of South Dakota and the South Dakota Knudson School of Law have partnered for "Project Rural Practice," that I think you heard a little bit about, where they provide stipends to rural attorneys. And then, finally, after graduation, students need mentors.

So state bar leaders are needed once again because when a new lawyer goes to a new community, the studies show that providing mentors to newer lawyers who may be isolated is important in their professional growth and development. It was mentioned before, the University of Arkansas, Little Rock Bowen School of Law's "Rural Practice Incubator Project." Part of what that project involves is actively supporting new lawyers with lawyer mentors and other professional resources that help get them started after they graduate.

Christy, you asked about our program, the "Rural Law Opportunities Program," and we found it incredibly helpful, those partnerships with state colleges, because on the ground, those colleges have invested in someone there who is responsible for the students, the undergraduate students in the program. And we come and give presentations and have programming there, but they also bring students to the law school, and those connections with the people at the undergraduate level are crucial.

And I've mentioned the state bar several times, but for our experience in particular, the state bar has been essential. Once the pipeline students become law students, we coordinate with the state bar. They have connections with lawyers all over the state. They connect law students with job opportunities. Rural practice lawyers may not hire as regularly as city lawyers who come every year to hire our students. So they may not necessarily be up to speed on how to find students who would be interested. So the bar works with those smaller firms and one or two-person shops to connect them with our career development office, who then, of course, has the ability to connect them with students who might be interested in practicing in a smaller town. The bar here circulates resumes for students interested in rural practice to lawyers in smaller towns. It provides discounts for job recruitment websites for those lawyers. It has a housing guide to help students and firms find housing in smaller communities. And they've just been really active in publicly recognizing this issue as a problem. It conducts studies that show which communities have lawyers and which do not.

The bar has adopted this just as a significant focus area for its work. It's developed what it calls the "Rural Practice Initiative" as active working groups examining possible solutions. Our current state bar president has conducted listening sessions this past summer all throughout the state to ensure that everyone understands the scope of the problem and to hear from people who are directly impacted by it. And we've gotten some really good ideas from those listening sessions, some that we just hadn't thought of that are really easy to implement. So we have sessions here with lawyers talking about different practice areas for our 1L students. And we probably hadn't invited rural lawyers as much to those sessions because we didn't know how much they would want to travel here. And they told us clearly, gosh, we'd love to be on just a general session to talk about family law or criminal law in addition to a rural practice session that's a standalone, but incorporating and giving representation to those lawyers is a great idea, and we've started to implement that.

You asked, "What could communities themselves do to help?" So I think one thing that I would suggest for employers is to not just think about hiring, but also recruiting. How can they show their summer associates the benefits of living in their community? Who will be their mentor? How will they develop them into competent and successful lawyers? What's the path toward partnership? Can you explain the financial benefits of rural practice? We've seen that in some areas, new lawyers start out with lawyer salaries, but in others they can grow into a much more competitive income over time because they might become a partner sooner or be able to have other investments in their towns, and lawyers need to explain that dynamic to a graduating law student.

And then, finally, I guess before I turn it back over to you, I'd say that rural employers and their connections in the communities could think about how to reduce roadblocks and barriers to somebody moving there. Are there incentives they can give? Nebraska

has had local communities give cash incentives to lawyers to move and start a practice there, for example. I'm running up on time, so I'll turn it back over to you, Christy. Thanks.

Kellye:

Thank you, Richard, and that's all right. I think I'll jump in to introduce Patty, but before I do that, thank you for helping us see the various opportunities for partnership along all the stages of the journey. That's a wonderful way to think about those opportunities. And we also really look forward to joining you in November. Thanks for hosting us.

Patty, I want to call you in and ask you to talk a little bit about online education because, not to state the obvious, I guess, but part of the problem with the rural area is it's rural. Maybe there's not a grocery store; there may not be a law school or a court. So I'm wondering how you've done so much in your leadership as dean at St. Mary's and online ed. How do you see the challenges and also the opportunities of that to bridge some of these justice gaps when we're looking at rural justice issues?

Patricia Roberts:

Thank you so much, Kellye, and thank you, LSAC and AALS, for doing this, and my fellow panelists. I always learn so much from you. Online legal education can really change the game, and I think it has been doing so for those who are seeking a law degree. Since we started our online JD five years ago, regularly we hear from students that they had given up the dream of becoming a lawyer. Many of those people are not located near a law school, or, more importantly, I think many of us took time out of the rest of our lives. We moved to law schools. That's a privilege that not everybody has.

And so online legal education allows people to stay rooted in their communities and access a legal education where they can stay in their communities at a reduced cost because they haven't had to move, they haven't had to leave their families, they haven't had to leave their jobs, and then they're able to make professional connections, or they already have connections in their community. And the hope is that they stay then to assist their community members. It doesn't always happen, but it certainly can increase the likelihood if someone didn't have to move for law school.

Oftentimes, when people move for law school, they make all their professional connections in the city where their law school is. This offers them an opportunity to stay. While the entirely online law degree that we started at St. Mary's as the first accredited one was five years ago, hybrid and weekend legal education has been happening for more than 10 years. And Loyola University Chicago has offered students the flexibility of a weekend JD that blended in-person and online education, and that's something that students have been accessing for over a decade. Syracuse University has had "JDinteractive" for many years now.

A recent example that they provided was a woman who lived in Alaska. She was a mother of six, but she became an assistant public advocate there in Alaska because she accessed Syracuse's "JDinteractive." A rural New York social services caseworker then became a family court attorney in her community, and a resident of the Big Island of Hawaii, where there is no law school, is obtaining her degree online so that she can remain and help her fellow islanders as their attorney. Their education did not require them to break their local ties. The ABA's February 2025 report gives us a clearer picture of whom distance education is reaching. There are now over 22 schools recognized as accredited by the ABA that have online JD programs or hybrid JD programs, and now Southwestern Law School has the first full-time, entirely online JD program, and majority of it is asynchronous.

So that's a new entry to the market, making it even more flexible for those who access that program. In the 2025 report, there were 17 reporting programs, and they had enrolled about a thousand first-year distance education students. The reasons that we hear at St. Mary's and my fellow deans at schools with JD programs online and hybrid programs hear is that flexibility, maintaining a career, avoiding relocation, program design, and financial considerations are all reasons to access an online JD degree. When we have surveyed our enrolled students, 82% refer to continuing work, 77% to caregiving, and 53% to geographic constraints. When you consider that there are over 1,300 U.S. counties that are legal deserts, I think we can make the assumption that many of those legal deserts also don't have law schools, or they perhaps might not be legal deserts. So online legal education can really expand the portfolio of lawyers we have available to serve those who need civil legal assistance in particular.

Why is it an advantage to bring legal education to students? Well, it's certainly access, continuity, so that they can keep earning income, keep taking care of their families, and be connected to those institutions and professionals that they were already connected to in their community. You may have an opportunity for students to be retained in law school more effectively if they're doing the program online because, again, they did not have to disrupt themselves or their family. The academic rigor is the same. Maybe some would say even more difficult because often the online programs, especially the part-time ones, are being undertaken by students who are already working full-time. They need extraordinary time management. Instructional design, best practices instructional design, also lends itself to requiring weekly assessments. That's something that doesn't necessarily happen in in-person law school classes.

So the rigor is maintained in an online program. I mentioned Southwestern's program, Seattle University's hybrid delivery with the regional "Hybrid Hubs" that Richard mentioned is very effective in South Sound, Central Washington, and Alaska. We have recently opened up a UTRGV, St. Mary's Legal Education Hub. UTRGV is an area, or, excuse me, the Rio Grande Valley in Texas is an area with one lawyer for more than

800 residents versus one lawyer for every 310 residents across Texas. So by partnering with that school, we're able to have our online students from that area use the facilities, gather, and have a more cohorted experience. But we have to make sure that we're accessing the services or that our online students can access the services that our in-person students get. They have to be able to make alumni connections. They have to have career strategy. They have to have experiential learning opportunities. There are so many things, advising, mentoring, academic support, so many things that we have to reimagine when we're thinking about them for the online students. It can be done.

The online students that we have experience with have a tremendous feeling of belonging both within their cohort, but also within the broader university. They're all in when they're part of the online program because, again, they're so grateful that they have the opportunity to access legal education without having to move and to leave their families and their work. The biggest thing in making them feel connected, besides the student support services that we're already required to provide under the ABA standards, I think it's making sure they have access to the in-person students. So one thing that we have done is asked our registered student organizations to have online meetings or hybrid meetings, and that's been a great experience for our online students, and also having online students as part of student government. Thanks so much, and I encourage you to reach out to any of the 22 law schools that have an online program.

Christiana:

Thank you so much, Dean Roberts. Really appreciate all of that. Many of our law schools are either starting or struggling to start our online programs, and there's a lot to learn from by listening to you and your experience. So thank you so, so much. I wanted to now bring Dean Leigh Saufley into the conversation. At least my experience sitting through this webinar has been really sort of an overwhelming amount of work that is being done by law schools in this space, and we know that we're all still running at it extremely hard. And so I wanted to just turn a little bit to ask you maybe for a description of some of the challenges or some words of caution to law schools that are struggling with or thinking about contributing to the question of access to rural justice.

And so, again, as I've done with the other panelists, let me just ask you a series of questions and then just turn it over to you. So primarily, what should law schools be cautious about when they think about what strategies they're able to employ to assist in alleviating the rural access to justice problem in their states or in the country? And what doesn't get solved simply by thinking about educating more lawyers? And then two other questions. How much of the retention problem, particularly the retention problem of keeping lawyers in rural communities, is outside of a law school's control, and what needs to be designed locally rather than treated as a national one-size-fits-all model, right? We are in a national conversation, but obviously some of this is very localized. So I'd love to hear from you about those questions.

Leigh Saufley:

Thanks so much, Christy. And as with everyone, I want to thank Kellye and Sudha and Christy for getting us all together and say again how extraordinary it is to hear from all of my colleagues about so many things that are going on across the country right now. There is a concerted effort, really, in every single law school to take a look at all of the issues around rural access to justice, which, those issues are making us think about all of the other issues around access to justice generally.

So as my colleagues know, I'm fond of alliteration, and anytime we are looking at a complex problem, I start off with creativity, connections, cautions, which I'm happy to talk about here today, and communications, thoughtful communications. And I made a list of some of the amazingly creative ways that law schools are going about this throughout the country, and you have seen it on the chat. I hope everybody's had a chance to take a look at some of those really creative options. And listening to Richard, I'm now expanding our list of connections to all of the people that we have to be engaged with as we're addressing this particular challenge. So I want to make sure, as we talk about cautions, that we're not being overly negative about this.

So one of my first cautions is: We should all acknowledge that this is a challenge that law schools have been working on now for a number of years. This is not new. There's creative work going on across the country. And when we fall to the Eeyore conversations and, "Oh, we can't," it actually is not particularly helpful for all of those we're connecting with and for our efforts to make those great changes. So if you think about the programs and the creative activities that you've heard about today, I think one of the things we need to do is to be talking more about our successes. And soon, the programs and the connections that we've made will start to bear serious fruit. We will start to have data that says some of what we are doing is working really well, and we can start reinforcing that in a variety of ways.

So one of your questions, Christy, is, "Is there a one-size-fits-all?" We all know the answer to that. There absolutely is not. Not only is every state different in the way we come to these, but rural areas are different, just as our urban areas are different. And so that brings us back to making sure that we are making connections with the communities before we begin to launch into our creative programs. And all of us... No, I won't say that. I have a tendency to say, "This is a great idea. Let's just do this," only to find out that there are a million different issues that should have been considered before we launched, and then we would have had greater success. So the caution is, there are many ways to address this problem, and we are addressing it across the country, but we definitely need to make sure we're connecting with the communities as we begin.

I also want to address one of the issues that Christy raised that I think is really, really important here. It is tempting for all of us to assume that with the rise in law school

applications and the ensuing rise in graduations from law school, we'll just close the access gap. And we really know that that cannot happen without careful planning and the support that you've heard lots about today. I will again stress that designing programs from the top down isn't going to work, and we absolutely need our communities involved.

And I want to talk just quickly about retention. I see that we're running out of time. I want to give everybody a chance to have some further conversation. With regard to retention of lawyers who have gone into our rural communities and then choose to return back to urban areas, just a couple of areas where I think we need to be gentle. We don't despair when lawyers in urban areas move from criminal litigation into civil litigation. We don't use words that are sometimes actually shaming people who have gone into rural areas and are not a good fit there. And what we want to do is encourage people to try it because, really, the question is, can you find the right fit for you and your family?

And that gets us back to, is the retention issue really something that law schools can control? And the answer, of course, is no. We cannot control it, but we can help. And we help by making those connections before our graduates arrive in a rural community. If we can help them set up connections with the local bar, as Richard said, the local bars are anxious to have new lawyers in town. They're wonderful when they make the connections, but the same thing is true of the local libraries, the local businesses, and if we help our graduates find a place where they feel welcomed and where they can start to help us with all of the challenges that we're seeing, we will do much better in the end.

One final thing as I turn it back over is: We have to be careful about our communications and our language. One of our colleagues very carefully said to all of us, "Stop sounding like the rural communities are the problem." The problem is access. And we have some beautiful rural communities throughout the country, all very different, many with tribal connections that we should be making those connections for. So as we talk about the problem, we need to make sure that our language reflects that the issue is access. It's not the wonderful communities that we're attempting to help. Thank you very much. Christy, it's yours.

Christiana:

Thank you so much, Dean Saufley. That was fabulous. The words of caution, the wise words of advice, the excellent and really important reminders. I really appreciate everything you had to say. We are running short on time, but we did want to just have one cross-panel question to all of you, and it's going to be a bit of a speed round, so please think about your intervention as being something like 30 to 45 seconds each.

And the question I really wanted to ask each of you is: For each of you in your locations, if you could secure one concrete commitment from someone outside of legal education,

the courts, the bar, the legislature, employers, funders, community partners, what would most improve the odds that the work that you are doing to alleviate the rural access to justice problem would be more successful? Let's start with Dean Kronk Warner.

Elizabeth:

Great. Thank you so much, Dean Ochoa. I would say I would love to see some funding from either a third party or our Utah legislature to do a tuition exchange for every year of tuition that that entity would pay, then the student would owe a year of service back, either in a community itself or through innovation that allows for legal services in rural communities. I think that would make a huge difference here in Utah. Thank you.

Christiana:

Fabulous answer. Dean Rebecca Zietlow, your turn.

Rebecca:

I'm going to have to echo Dean Kronk Warner. I feel the same way. I really think a lot of it, as Dean Saufley said, rural communities are lovely places to live. Being an attorney in a rural community, you're respected, you're part of the community. There are many rural practices that are looking to retire. And, I mean, there's lots of opportunities, but the biggest barrier, I think, is financial. So the Ohio State Legislature loan forgiveness is a step in that direction. I'd love to see more programs like more loan-forgiveness-type programs, more stipends, et cetera.

Christiana:

Fabulous. Excellent. Dean Richard Moberly, what are your thoughts?

Richard:

Well, I wouldn't turn down money. I mean, I love the idea that you all are talking about money, but I won't say it again. I would focus on mentoring. What I worry about is solo practitioners or new law graduates going to communities where they don't have people who can help the finishing that we all know is necessary for the early years of practice. And if we could work with bar associations and figure out how to get mentoring for our new graduates, I think that would help them stay in those communities and feel connected.

Christiana:

Fabulous. Dean Patty Roberts, your thoughts?

Patricia:

Completely agree with my colleagues. If we could have a structured rural practice pathway that combines paid student placements, postgraduate employment support, and sustained mentoring, I think that will go a long way whether our students graduate from in-person or online program.

Christiana:

Fabulous. Really, really helpful. And finally, Dean Saufley.

Leigh:

So, along with Dean Moberly, I would never turn down money, and as you have all said, mentoring and connections in the bar are very, very important. But one of the things I have heard from some of our graduates is that what they really long for are connections outside of the practice of law. So connections with the community through the local libraries, through other groups and organizations, so they feel like they are not just a lawyer who has arrived, but a whole person.

Christiana:

Thank you all very, very much. We really appreciate your insights on that because we know that so much of this is going to rely on partnership. Kellye Testy, I'll turn it over to you.

Kellye:

Well, Christy, I might, if you don't mind, ping it back to you for just a second in that you've been such a wonderful moderator, but I know you've thought deeply about these areas too, and I wonder if you just want to take a minute to make any comment on what you would hope to see or any advice for all of us. We've all appreciated your leadership, so I just want to open that up for your own substantive comment before I close.

Christiana:

Thank you. I really appreciate that. Well, I do want to say that a couple of years ago, I would've said some concerted conversation among the deans that are working on this problem, and AALS has really provided a vital infrastructure for this conversation. And we know that the work that you've done and the work that LSAC is doing to create the convening in November is going to be a platform for real progress on these issues. And so that would've been one of my wishes two years ago, and here we are, which is to say, dreams can come true. And so, yes, on money, of course. In fact, there are legislative initiatives in Indiana that have passed but have not been funded, and so they're not as fruitful as they could be. And so we're hoping to continue to make progress there.

And then I would say that if I had one additional wish, it would be something like a recognition that we are in this problem together. The bench, the bar, legal education. As you mentioned at the beginning of the conversation, this is a complex problem. Complex problems require multiple partners working on complex solutions. And so I'm very grateful for the conversations that are just about to get underway, and I know that we're all each having inside our own states, but I am really hopeful for additional sort of good-faith engagement and partnership.

Kellye:

Very good. Well, I can't thank each and all of you enough. What a wonderful program you've put on today, but I can't thank you and all the deans more for the leadership that I'm seeing. I can't believe how much progress has been made, especially over the last couple years. Now, I know many things date before that, and we always need people kind of getting going at different times. So I would just say to all of us, let's keep leaning into our relative areas of expertise. This is one that's going to take all of us. Let's not be afraid to try things. Some things may work, some things may not. That's okay. Let's keep lifting each other up and leaning in where we can bring resources. And, of course, if there's some legislatures and philanthropists out there today, you heard it here first. Everybody's ready to help some funding. There's a lot of funding a lot of times for medical health, not so much for legal health, but it's equally important to human flourishing. So let's keep moving forward so that we can help all people in our country live the lives that they deserve, and rural justice is a big part of that. Thank you all for being with us today, and we look forward to the next webinar and to the great convening in November at Nebraska. Thank you so much.

Announcer:

Visit LSAC.org to learn more.