Felix Frankfurter once claimed that “the law and lawyers are what the law schools make them.” One need not agree completely with this statement, insofar as it may exaggerate the effectiveness of law schools in teaching professional skills, in instilling professional values, or in affecting the functioning of the legal system, in order to recognize that legal education has an important role to play in all of these areas.

There is an important relationship between legal education, the practice of law, and the functioning of the legal system. While this proposition should appear obvious to legal educators, it remains a somewhat controversial assertion within traditional academic faculties of law. Some legal educators
believe that the law school should be an academic department of the university like all others, where the pursuit of truth, research and scholarship, and the transmission of knowledge, are the only proper intellectual activities. Some remain skeptical of the claim that a law school, as a professional school, also has an educational responsibility to prepare its students to be competent practitioners, to socialize and acculturate its students into the values and norms of the legal profession, and to charge its students with a responsibility for addressing malfunctions in the legal system?

Three related claims: (1) that there is a vital connection between legal education and the public interest because lawyers use their education, for better or worse, in the real world; (2) that the public interest requires law students to learn they have a social and professional responsibility to challenge injustice and to pursue social justice in society; and (3) that the law school clinic is the primary place in the law school where students can learn to be competent, ethical, socially responsible lawyers. In order to do this I will need to provide a description of clinical legal education and an account of its history, and then to situate it within the law school curriculum.