

Backgrounder: Student Consultation November 23 2009

Since 1996, the ELC Society has partnered with the UVic Faculty of Law to operate Canada's first and most comprehensive public interest environmental law clinical program. This program emerged as a result of efforts by a variety of volunteers – students, faculty and local practitioners – to create a vehicle that allowed students to gain hands-on learning experiences in public interest environmental law and promote access to environmental justice for citizens and citizen groups across the province. Over time, the range of activities undertaken under the auspices of the ELC Society and the ELC clinic have grown significantly, as has the ELC's reputation nationally and internationally.

The ELC currently employs two staff lawyers, a contract lawyer, a paralegal/administrator and two articling students. It also has an Executive Director and a Board of Directors composed of students, faculty, lawyers and community members who donate their time on a *pro bono* basis. Its capacity to deliver programs and provide student mentorship is augmented by 14 ELC Associates and 11 ELC Fellows, lawyers with diverse backgrounds in related private practice areas in locations throughout the province, who collaborate with the ELC on an ongoing basis. The ELC offers two clinic courses, the most popular being the core clinic, for which students receive the equivalent of one course credit and in which approximately one third of UVic law students enrol. In addition, since 2007 the ELC has offered the Intensive Stream course, which allows up to six students to gain half their course credits for the year in the area of environmental law.

All of these activities have significantly increased the ELC's capacity in the past few years to serve a province-wide clientele on a diverse range of public interest environmental law issues. The ELC works with client lawyers, First Nations, community organizations and individuals in all areas of environmental law, and provides services in the areas of law reform, litigation support, administrative tribunal support, legal research and writing, and legal education.

The ELC is responsible for raising its own program funds which, particularly in recent years, it has done with considerable success. Currently, we have one private core funder and also receive program funding from the Law Foundation of BC.

Flowing from discussions with the ELC Board of Directors, ELC staff and the Dean of Law, we believe it is time to undertake a process that considers the ELC's future strategic priorities with a view to renewing both the vision of the organization and securing stable funding adequate to supporting that vision. Such a process would also have synergies with a five-year review process that the Faculty of Law will, as a whole, be undergoing during 2010.

To this end, we are inviting interested students to open this process by undertaking a "blue sky" visioning session on Monday November 23 from 12:00 to 1:00 p.m. The purpose of the consultation is to identify the student perspective of the strengths of the ELC and opportunities open to it that will build on its successes and development to date. The hope is to focus ELC priorities on activities that provide an ideal fit with our vision and mission:

Vision: The ELC envisions a British Columbia where local communities, environmental groups, and First Nations have the legal tools and resources to advocate effectively for the restoration, conservation, and protection of this province's unique and diverse environment.

Mission: The ELC aims to foster the health of British Columbia's environment by working to:

- Inspire and educate students by providing hands-on advocacy experience and direct exposure to the challenges and rewards of public interest environmental law;
- Engage and collaborate with local communities, environmental groups, and First Nations through the provision of timely legal information and effective pro bono legal representation;
- Advocate for reforms to environmental laws through thoughtful, scientifically sound, and pragmatic legislative proposals;
- Strengthen access to justice by producing high-quality legal research, and through participation in administrative and court proceedings.

It is our hope, as much as possible, that this process can remain focussed on the needs of, and opportunities awaiting, the ELC as it embarks on its "teenage" years. At this juncture, it is not uncommon for organizations to experience "mission-drift" as the result of being influenced by funder priorities or other external factors. Consequently, in our consultations we will endeavour to steer discussion away from whether new ideas are fundable or whether they would be attractive to particular funders and instead focus on the merits of ideas and their synergies with our mandate and vision, now and in the future.

It is important to note that while these sessions provide an opportunity to contemplate changes to the mandate and operations of the ELC, this process is not being undertaken on the premise that change is necessary or beneficial; maintenance and consolidation of our current structure and operations will thus remain very much a viable option moving forward.

We invite you to consider the student perspective on the following questions in preparation for the consultation on November 23:

- What makes the ELC a strong, vibrant organization?
- What are its signature activities that the Faculty of Law and BC community could not/could live without?
- How could the ELC meet the environmental law needs in BC that are not being met?
- How can the ELC position itself for organizational resilience and relevance?

The ELC will be hosting similar consultation sessions with the Faculty, UVic community, Greater Victoria community and the legal community (including the local bar, ELC Associates and Fellows, and ELC and law alumni) with a view to summarizing this information as background for a strategic planning session of ELC Society board members in 2010. Ultimately all this information will form the basis for a three year strategic plan that will be renewed on an ongoing basis.

We look forward to hearing from you on November 23 at 12noon.

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