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I. Introduction

This guide addresses the basic resources and strategies for finding government and public service jobs. The wide range of government and public interest jobs, and the resources for identifying these jobs, makes comprehensive treatment difficult, so this guide should be treated as an overview rather than a complete listing of available resources. In addition to your own independent research, previous manuals, the Career Center website, and career counselors should also be consulted.

II. Frequently Asked Questions

A. What is the timing of a public interest job search?

The public interest job search is quite different from a private sector search. The timetable for government and public interest employers varies for each employer. Public interest students need to have patience and the willingness to live with some anxiety, as they will likely obtain a job much later than those planning to work in the private sector.

Generally, hiring begins in the fall for many fellowships, government positions (federal government honors programs, criminal prosecutors in major cities, and municipal law departments), and large public defender offices. A few of these employers have early deadlines ranging from mid-August to early September of your 3L year. The appendix to the Arizona Guide (mentioned later in this section) lists many of these deadlines and positions. Others accept applications on a rolling basis, making it wise to get your applications in early. Still others will be hiring throughout the winter and spring and even into the fall after you graduate. Beginning in February and continuing through the summer and fall following your graduation, many of the direct services employers post entry-level jobs for new graduates. Many of these job postings can be found at PSLawNet.org. Even if you apply early, you may not hear back for a long time, so just make sure you periodically check back in regarding the status of your application and continue to express your interest in the position.

Hiring also depends on practice rules in each state. Some states—New York, Georgia, and Ohio are examples—permit graduates who are awaiting admission to appear in court if they take the first bar exam after graduation. Others, like Colorado, do not allow graduates to appear until they are admitted to the bar. Public interest organizations in these states often will not hire until the fall after graduation, after applicants have passed the bar.

As is true of all job searches, being engaged early and staying focused is the best way to ensure that you do not miss out on opportunities, as the passage of time means that some jobs are no longer available. Likewise, although many government and public interest jobs are posted, there are also many unadvertised positions that come open throughout the year.

B. What should I be doing now?

The first step is making an in-person or phone appointment with a counselor to construct a job search plan. Further steps you should take now are: 1) becoming familiar with PSLawNet’s “opportunities” searches and signing up to receive Email Alerts (can select by practice area, geography, job and organization type); 2) reviewing the postings for government programs (those in the Government Honors and Internship Guide, noted below, as well as those on agency-specific or state-specific lists); 3) bidding to interview with public interest and government employers that attend On-Campus Interviewing; 4) considering attending the Equal Justice Works Career Fair in Bethesda, MD, in October; 5) signing up for Duke’s Public Interest listserv, and, if you are interested in post-graduate fellowships, then also signing up for the Post-graduate Fellowships listserv; (6) networking to identify people that may be able to help you in your job search; and (7) beginning letter writing.

We suggest that you keep detailed records of your job search efforts. Some students find it helpful to construct a chart with four categories: 1) date of application or contact; 2) group and position; 3) contact person; and 4) result/notes. Being organized will help you know when you need to follow up and when it is time to contact additional organizations.
You should also be aware that many public interest jobs are “hidden” or un-posted. Thus, writing letters and contacting organizations of interest to you, whether they have advertised a position or not, should be a part of your plan. If you are told that they are not currently hiring when you first contact them, make a note to check back in with them again in a month or two.

As with private sector job searches, networking should be a significant part of your efforts. Networking is the process of using connections to people to gain information about careers and job openings. Some studies show that 70% of jobs are obtained through networking. One option to learn about particular practice areas and organizations is to set up “informational interviews” in order to ask practicing lawyers about their careers; these can be brief phone interviews or can happen in person over coffee or lunch. One way to set them up is by emailing a short note with your resume attached by way of introduction. You can tell them how you found their contact information (Were they recommended by someone else? Did you find them through an alumni directory? or Did you simply find them because you researched their organization?) and inquire whether they might be available to speak with you by phone or meet with you.

When networking, you should start with those you have a connection to, including professors, relatives and friends, former employers etc. You should also reach out to alumni from Duke Law or your undergraduate institution. In addition, you should contact others who do government or public interest work that interests you and/or is in locations of interest to you. All of these contacts can: 1) inform you about “hidden” or un-posted opportunities or positions that may come open; 2) put in a good word for you with those who are hiring 3) tell you about other organizations that do the work in which you are interested; and 4) highlight important tips for applying to these often unique jobs.

C. Are there specific things that government and public interest employers look for in candidates?

For many government and public interest employers, the most significant thing they look for in an applicant is an interest in and commitment to the mission and work of the organization. Although some of the national level non-profit organizations and some federal government agencies are concerned about academic standing, for most public interest employers, your interest in an organization’s work is far more important and your academic record may be deemphasized. This does not mean that your skills and abilities are not important, but rather that grades may be less of a factor than with many other types of employers.

One of the ways you can demonstrate an interest in the work of an organization is through developing your “public interest credentials”. Although you may have had the opportunity through pro bono and volunteer work to work with the issues an organization deals with or the types of clients it works with, engagement in other public interest activities is another good indicator for employers. Prior summer jobs and volunteer work in college can also help demonstrate your interest. Keep in mind that you can continue to develop your “credentials” throughout your third year by way of pro bono work, coursework, clinics and school year externships.

Government and public interest employers often give entry-level lawyers significant responsibility. Thus, they are interested in candidates who have developed their lawyering skills through clinics, internships, journals, classes, moot court, and pro bono work. Another factor they look to is leadership experience. Depending on the work of the employer, some skills may be more important than others, but some of the more commonly emphasized skills are researching and writing; speaking; the ability to see the world through the eyes of others; integrity; negotiation skills; judgment; and creativity.

Within broad categories, it is possible to distill particular factors that certain types of employers look for, though these are clearly generalizations. The following summary provides some guidance regarding what to emphasize in your personal development and in your outreach to employers:

**Government employers (local, state and federal):** Require evidence of public service commitment and excellent writing skills. Though they prefer students with public sector work experience, they tend to see law firm experience more favorably than other public interest employers. Most of the federal government honors programs do consider grades, but not to the exclusion of other factors.
Prosecutors and Public Defenders: Look for similar skills and hire in similar ways. Both tend to hire entry level lawyers in “classes” and often favor those who have interned during the summer or school year, either in their specific office or with another office. They value experience in direct advocacy and hire those with speaking experience (clinics, trial advocacy classes, and moot court), who have taken criminal procedure and evidence, and who have a commitment to public service.

Direct services: Value experience interviewing clients, working with community groups, negotiating with agencies, oral advocacy, and quality written work that is produced efficiently. Language proficiency, in languages that are the native language of many of their clients, is also highly valued.

Law reform/policy: Many only hire entry-level attorneys through one or two year fellowship programs. Because they do complex litigation or policy work, they value the ability to conduct complex research and analysis and to distill information for use in a variety of formats. They value clinic experience, internships at impact organizations, journal work and judicial clerkships.

International: International public interest organizations are very hard to break into. They rarely hire entry-level lawyers except through fellowships. Networking is incredibly important in this field. Publishing a note or article on a timely international topic is a good way to make you stand out. It definitely helps to have contacts or expertise either geographically or in a substantive area of law.

Public Interest Law Firms: Value skills in advocacy and research and writing.

D. How widely should I be casting my net and for how many jobs should I be applying?

The best advice is to apply broadly. You should try for your “dream” job, but you should also remain flexible and apply to jobs “outside the box” in broad geographic areas. For example, if you are interested in environmental work, do not restrict yourself to non-profits or the obvious government agencies, like the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of the Interior. There are many “lesser known” government agencies that do environmental work and deserve your consideration — such as the Department of Agriculture or the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. There is no limit on the number of jobs you may apply to and, unlike the judicial clerkship process, there is no stigma to being offered a job and declining it. Thus, we advise you to apply for ALL jobs that may interest you; you will thereby learn about more opportunities and you may be surprised to discover a fantastic job along the way.

E. Is there a difference in cover letters and resumes for government and public interest jobs?

Your cover letter is your “brief” for why you should be hired. Cover letters and resumes for government and public interest jobs are different than those you would use in the private sector. While we counsel all students that each cover letter needs to be unique to the specific organization and job, this is particularly true for government and public interest jobs. For government and public interest jobs, it is critical that you understand the work and mission of the organization, including who the organization’s clients or constituents are and how the organization advocates for its clients or constituents. Also, is it focused on litigation, policy, legislation or a combination of these? You need to research the organization to learn these things. All government and public interest organizations that are hiring want applicants to show a commitment to the mission of the organization and a willingness to work within the challenges inherent in public service employment. This needs to be demonstrated in your cover letter and in your interview.

When necessary to demonstrate the points noted below, you do NOT need to limit cover letters to one-page. When a cover letter is part of an application, as it almost always is for government and public interest employers, it should demonstrate a clear commitment to the work of the organization and its clients and should: 1) highlight particular skills or traits you possess that are necessary for the job (these may come out of the job description); 2) note any prior experience, whether through jobs, internships, coursework, a clinic, or volunteer and pro bono work, with the issues and clients; 3) express an interest in the geographical area (for public interest and government positions this is often secondary to showing a commitment to the organization’s work but, depending on the employer, may still be
significant); and (4) may address additional public service work. Your cover letter is NOT a chronological repetition of your resume, rather it is where you emphasize your interest and commitment, as well as the skills and knowledge you have acquired that will serve the employer. Your resume may need to be reworked to emphasize public service experience, clinics, volunteer work, and leadership roles. For example, clinic experience might be set out separately in the “Experience” section of your resume, rather than simply being included in your “Activities” section under law school. Like with the cover letter, your resume may be longer than one page for many employers (especially federal government agencies).

F. Other than cover letters and resumes, what else should be included with an application?

Most employers require a cover letter and resume. Others also ask for a list of three references with their contact information, including address, phone and email. For your references, you can use a professor, a summer employer, or a prior employer. Be prepared with a writing sample and a transcript as both may be requested of you.

H. Are interviews different for government and public interest jobs than private sector jobs?

The main difference between government and public interest job interviews and those in the private sector is the importance of clearly demonstrating a commitment to and passion for the work of the organization. If you have worked or volunteered with a similar organization or client population, you should be prepared to talk about your experience and connect it to your interest in the position. You should also have three key points about yourself or your experience that you want to convey, even if you are not asked about them specifically. As with any interview, you should be prepared to talk about any experience listed on your resume and know your key talking points about that listing. Certainly if you have had coursework or summer experiences on point, or written relevant papers or publications, you should be familiar with key lessons or concepts of each and be prepared to discuss them.

Some public interest employers distinguish between candidates by asking substantive legal questions in the interviews. These include some public defender offices and environmental organizations. You may be asked questions about your approach to research and writing assignments or given a hypothetical to see how you might advise a client in a sensitive situation or deal with an ethical dilemma. These questions may be designed to see how you think on your feet, rather than whether you know the relevant law.

As with all interviews, it is important that you come with a list of questions for the potential employer or networking contact. Although you may not always get the opportunity to ask them, questions are a way to demonstrate your sincere interest in a position. If you do not have questions, a lack of interest on your part may be assumed. Do not ask questions that are readily apparent on an organization’s website or that are answered in a job description, although you can ask for more detail about topics that are addressed in these places. Some typical question topics include: what you should anticipate working on with the employer?; what kind of supervision you will have?; what type of training is provided?; and what you can do to be prepared for the job?.

After the interview, you should always follow up with an email or letter thanking the interviewer.

H. How should multiple offers be handled?

If you are in the position of having more than one offer, or of having an offer while you are still waiting to hear back from other employers, you should consult with a career counselor about how best to handle your situation. You may always make an appointment, stop by the office or send an email.

It is important to always get back to an employer as soon as possible after receiving a communication from them. When receiving an offer, be appreciative and grateful but do not inadvertently accept it if that is not your intent. If the employer does not tell you how much time you have to decide, you should politely and confidently ask them. If they are not a NALP employer, you may need to ask for time.

If you have an offer but have not heard back from another employer which is your first choice, you should contact them and let them know that you have an offer but that you would prefer to work with them. This may convince them to speed up their process and make you an offer.
I. Are judicial clerkships important for government or public interest work?

Post-graduate judicial clerkships and summer judicial clerkships can be of great value in your professional development and to potential employers. Clerkships give you valuable skills in dealing with complex legal analysis and writing. Gaining an insider’s view of the courts can also be tremendously helpful. Certainly, if your long term interest is in academia, a clerkship is one of the most important things you can do. Public interest employers value clerkships as preparation for entry level jobs. National level organizations focused on law reform strongly prefer to hire those with prior clerking experience.

III. Where to Find Public Interest Jobs

Government and public interest jobs are widely varied. Government jobs are not only available at the federal and state levels, in every branch of government, but also at the local government level in places like city and county attorney offices and school systems. Public interest jobs exist within non-governmental organizations domestically and internationally and include a wide-range of 501(c)(3) organizations. They cover diverse subject matter, including civil rights, child protection, LGBT issues, religious issues, animal rights and environmental issues. Some organizations focus on litigation, others on policy or legislation, and others do a combination of these. Due to the diversity of government and public interest jobs, there is no one source where all jobs or organizations are posted. The following is a small sampling of the places you should look for both job postings and organizational information so that you may contact organizations of interest to you. For additional resources, please see the Career Center website and, in particular, its list of web sites for domestic and international job searches.

A. Public Service Law Network Worldwide (www.PSLawNet.org):

This website not only has specific job postings, but also has one of the best collections of resources for public interest and government job searches anywhere. The Career Central section of the website offers numerous resources that are collected and easy to use, including job search resources, government job resources, and information about public interest organizations. This site is a great beginning place, or a refresher, as you work on applications.

Especially helpful for job searches is the “opportunities” search feature on the home page of PSLawNet, which allows you to search for current postings. To access the database, register at www.pslawnet.org. Because Duke Law is a member school, the service is free to students and alumni. You can search the database by geographical region, type of organization, and practice area.

To make searching even easier, if you are interested in receiving e-mails from PSLawNet that will inform you of job listings matching your interests, submit a personal profile.

You can also research public interest organizations through the Employer Organizations listed in the link on the home page. You can use these contacts to write to employers that do not have current job openings posted on the site, but which may have positions come open in the future or unadvertised positions. This section of the site is a good resource for networking contacts as well.

B. Symplicity:

Public interest employers routinely post job announcements on Duke Law School’s Symplicity site. This includes permanent positions and organizations seeking to host post-graduate fellows.

C. On-Campus Interviewing (OCI):

Several government and public interest employers will be participating in Fall OCI throughout the season. However, many will interview 3L candidates for positions on September 15-16, 2010. To interview with these employers, be sure to bid for interviews during the normal OCI sign-up process.
D. **Equal Justice Works Career Fair:**

Duke Law participates in the Equal Justice Works (EJW) Career Fair held every fall. The 2010 Equal Justice Works Fair will take place on October 22-23 in Bethesda, MD. Some employers will be conducting interviews and others will simply have “table talk” (information tables). There are usually about 150 public interest and government employers. To register for the Fair, go to the EJW website, [www.equaljusticeworks.org/](http://www.equaljusticeworks.org/). For the EJW Fair, students are required to submit resumes and other requested information directly to the employers. After you submit your resumes, the employers will contact you to schedule interviews. **Students are strongly encouraged to submit resumes to employers several weeks before the Fair to allow sufficient time for resume review and scheduling of interviews.**

E. **Government Honors Programs and other Federal and State Government Jobs:**

Many federal government positions are through the respective agency’s honors program. Other offices will hire entry-level employees, but most do not. If you are interested in applying for government honors programs you should read the Government Honors and Internship Handbook, available at [http://www.law.arizona.edu/career/honorshandbook.cfm](http://www.law.arizona.edu/career/honorshandbook.cfm). This handbook also lists some state and local government positions. There is a listing of all post-graduate positions in an appendix at the end of the handbook. The current username and password are available through the Career Center. We will have an updated username and password in August 2010. The Career Center Summer Toolkit on the website also has a PowerPoint with information about non-honors program federal government jobs and a handout on the top ten federal agencies for legal hiring in 2010-2012.

State government positions are generally listed on a state website with a search feature. These jobs include postings for Assistant District Attorneys, legislative lawyers, positions within Attorney General Offices, Public Defender positions and many others. For some of these types of positions, you must have already passed the bar exam before you will be offered a position. However, it is still a good thing to research the positions and make contact with offices you are interested in. [www.PSLawNet.org](http://www.PSLawNet.org) has a section on state government positions, which includes links to almost all of the individual state employment websites.

For both federal and state government jobs, it is important to make sure you fully complete the applications, which generally require forms in addition to a resume and cover letter. The PSLawNet website has a collection of resources to help with these applications, including the Federal Legal Employment Opportunities Guide which is a must read when applying to federal jobs.

F. **Political and Policy Jobs**

The University of Arizona School of Law began publishing a Public Policy Handbook in spring of 2010 that is much like its Government Honors and Internship Guide. The Handbook lists internships and post-graduate positions (typically fellowships) that are public policy related. The Handbook can be found at [http://www.law.arizona.edu/career/PublicPolicy10-11/LoginForm.cfm](http://www.law.arizona.edu/career/PublicPolicy10-11/LoginForm.cfm). The user name and password, which will be updated in August of 2010, are available through the Career Center.

For jobs on the Hill, a great resource is the Yale Law School Capitol Hill Guide [www.law.yale.edu/documents/pdf/CDO_Public/2009_CAPITOLHILLSGUIDEFINALPUBLIC.pdf](http://www.law.yale.edu/documents/pdf/CDO_Public/2009_CAPITOLHILLSGUIDEFINALPUBLIC.pdf) which includes a list of resource for job postings and conducting background research. For political positions, like jobs in a congressional office, committee work or party work, networking is the best way to promote yourself. The Senate has an employment placement office that posts positions. For congressional offices, it helps if you are from the state of the congress person. Typically, for non-political positions, like those of legislative counsel, Senate or House Counsel, or in the Library of Congress, they will not hire candidates with a political background.

Other websites of interest are:
G. Post-graduate Fellowships:

If you are interested in a post-graduate fellowship, you should begin looking into opportunities and planning to apply as soon as possible. Postgraduate fellowships are a wonderful professional development opportunity for graduating students. There are many post-graduate fellowships available to graduating students for terms of one to two years. Some are hosted through and paid by organizations, law schools or other institutions. Although there is no one source to find these postings, PSLawNet.org is one of the most comprehensive sources. There is a “Fellowships” tab that collects many fellowships, with a wide range of organizations, by application deadline. You can also do an “opportunities” search and search for “fellowships.” In addition, fellowship positions are regularly posted by employers on Duke’s Symplicity site which has a separate category in the jobs section for “fellowships” as a position type.

Other fellowships, like the Skadden Fellowships, Equal Justice Works Fellowships, Fulbright Fellowships, or the Soros Justice Advocacy Fellowships provide funding for positions that students create or identify on their own. For these fellowships, students must develop a project in advance and generally must identify a host organization to sponsor them. If you are interested in this type of fellowship, it will require advance effort on your part to have all of the necessary details completed by the fellowship application deadline.

There are also a few government sponsored fellowships. Two of the most significant are: 1) the White House Fellows Program (www.whitehouse.gov/about/fellows/) where fellows spend a year as full-time, paid assistants to senior White House Staff and other top-ranking officials; and 2) the Presidential Management Fellows Program (PMF) (www.pmf.opm.gov/) which is a competitive two-year program offering graduates the opportunity to work for a federal agency of their choice and the possibility of converting to a permanent employee upon completion of the program. Students interested in the PMF Program must be nominated by Duke Law School. Additional information about the PMF program will be available early in the Fall Semester.

Duke has a listserv for posting notices about fellowship positions. To be added to the listserv, go to http://mailman.law.duke.edu/mailman/listinfo (you can also be added to the Public Interest listserv here) and look for the “Postgraduatefellowships” listing.

Duke’s career counselors and the Assistant Dean of Public Interest and Pro Bono are happy to help you with your plans and applications for these and other fellowships.

H. Additional Resources:

Please keep in mind the many additional resources for finding government and public interest employment that are available at the law school. In addition to career counselors and the Assistant Dean of Public Interest and Pro Bono, the clinic professors and many of the faculty members throughout the school can be of assistance. The Career Center also maintains a library of resources. A few of the best ones are:

Serving the Public: A Job Search Guide Volume I – USA: This handbook and directory, published by Harvard Law School, is for law students and lawyers seeking public service work, including government and non-profit organizations. This publication also provides information on funding for public interest summer internships, post-graduate fellowships, federal honors programs, entrepreneurial grants, and judicial clerkships.

Serving the Public: A Job Search Guide Volume II – International: Volume II of Serving the Public provides information on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), intergovernmental organizations including the United Nations, opportunities within the United States Government, and international fellowships.

Good Works – A Guide to Careers in Social Change: This publication provides profiles of professionals with careers in public service and a national directory of public service organizations.

Nonprofit Sector Yellow Book: A who’s who in the management of the leading foundations, universities, museums, and other non-profit organizations.
Lawful Pursuit: Careers in Public Interest Law: This publication is designed to give students and beginning lawyers practical information on choosing and following career paths in the practice of law.

H. Websities:

Idealist (Action without Borders) (www.idealst.org): Comprehensive listing of public service positions, both legal and non-legal, in over 140 countries. This is an especially good site for post-graduate job listings.

National Legal Aid and Defender Associations (www.nlada.org/jobop.htm): This is the best site for post-graduate jobs in civil legal services organizations and defender organizations. Searchable by state and useful for finding contacts for summer internships as well.

Foundation Center (www.foundationcenter.org): Provides information about every foundation in the country and includes a jobs database.

Roll Call Jobs (www.rcjobs.com): Features jobs in government affairs, lobbying and other positions with organizations that do lobbying or other work with the federal government.

Elaw (www.elaw.org): Run by the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide, it lists worldwide organizations that do environmental work.

National Fair Housing Advocate (www.fairhousing.com): Lists positions with organizations and agencies dealing with fair housing issues.

Many additional internet-based resources are available on the Career and Professional Development Center website: www.law.duke.edu/career/pdf/libraryinternetresources.pdf

IV. Loan Repayment

Law school is expensive, and we recognize that students go to great lengths to finance their legal education. There are a number of sources available to aid graduates in repaying their educational loans. Some programs, like Duke Law’s loan repayment program, are designed to help graduates working in public service. Others, like the new College Cost Reduction Act, have provisions to aid graduates doing all kinds of work, so long as they qualify based on their income. Other programs are specific to particular employers.

A. Duke Law School’s Loan Repayment Program:

Duke Law School wants its graduates to be able to pursue the interests and passions they have developed throughout their lives. Accordingly, Duke is proud to offer a generous loan repayment assistance program for graduates that enter into a life of public service. Below is a web link to information on the Duke Law School LRAP website, as well as the national and state LRAP programs currently available. For additional information and an individual counseling session on debt responsibility and LRAP, you can schedule an appointment with John Ahlers, Director of Financial Aid.

For information on the Duke Law School LRAP program, see www.law.duke.edu/admis/financial/lrap.

B. College Cost Reduction Act:

There is also a new Federal Program available for many higher education loans. This program may reduce your monthly loan payments whether you have a public interest job or not, as it is income based. It also covers non-legal jobs and non-law school debt. Additionally, the program allows for full loan forgiveness after ten years of public service work, which is very broadly defined. For information on the federal College Cost Reduction and Access Act, and additional information on student debt, see
www.equaljusticeworks.org/resource/ccraa.

C. **Other Loan Repayment Programs:**

For information on state LRAPs, see [www.abanet.org/legalservices/sclaid/lrap/statelraps.html](http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/sclaid/lrap/statelraps.html).

For a list of Legal Services Corporation grantee organizations with employer LRAPs, see [http://www.lri.lsc.gov/sitepages/management/management_lrap.htm](http://www.lri.lsc.gov/sitepages/management/management_lrap.htm).

For federal agencies with employer LRAPs, contact individual agencies and visit: [http://www.opm.gov/oca/pay/studentloan/index.asp](http://www.opm.gov/oca/pay/studentloan/index.asp).

VI. **Acknowledgements**

In creating this guide, a number of resources were referenced and relied on, including:

- Significant use of information from handbooks created by the Public Interest Law Center of the New York University School of Law;
- The Government Honors and Internships Guide published by the University of Arizona School of Law; and
- [www.PSLawNet.org](http://www.PSLawNet.org)