

New York City Bar Association

Why Getting Legal Experience as an Evening Student is Important and How to Do It

This article explores various strategies that evening students can use to obtain legal experience while they are still in school and holding down a full-time job. As an evening student, you might think (and rightly so) that your decision to attend law school and the sacrifices you are making, particularly with respect to time, should be sufficient to convey your commitment to your new chosen career. Many legal employers, however, will still want to see some additional elements of your commitment within the time constraints you have. Moreover, getting legal experience while you are in school will help you gain clarity on the area of law that you may wish to pursue. Some students enter law school with set ideas and goals, some are less certain, and others change directions based on their course work and experiences in law school.

For all law students, obtaining legal experience during law school is important because it:

- demonstrates commitment to a legal career
- increases marketability
- reinforces legal concepts with practical, hands-on work experience to hone skills in legal analysis and writing, and perhaps even client interaction
- helps in identifying preferred practice areas and employer settings, thus refining career goals within the legal field; and
- provides introductions to future colleagues who become mentors, professional contacts, and references.

For evening students who work full-time and who are in law school to change careers, getting legal experience during law school can be challenging, given individual commitments and the multitude of demands on their time. Every evening student has a unique situation and different commitments with varying degrees of flexibility. Some students may have some flexibility with their job. Others may have no flexibility. Then there are those who may be in a position to consider changing full-time jobs and getting another with a legal component. There is no “one size” or one template that fit all evening students. The hope here is to provide the evening student with information, guidance, and a few suggestions for creative ways to get legal experience that can fit into a hectic schedule.

Opportunities for Legal Experience at Your Law School

All the opportunities below, individually or in combination, would allow evening law students to explore their legal career interests, get practical legal experience that demonstrates their commitment to becoming a lawyer, and establish relationships with professors, practitioners,

and even clients. More importantly, most if not all of the work and time commitment involved in these endeavors can be done according to one's availability and schedule.

- **CLINICS:** Clinics (if your law school offers any) will help you get essential lawyering skills as well as opportunities to apply those skills in a real situation, and a real practice setting, and have you interacting with real clients.
- **TEACHING ASSISTANT:** Evening students who enjoyed their legal writing class and did well might want to consider being a 1L legal writing teaching assistant ("TA"). Communicate your interest in being a TA to your instructor and ascertain what the process is to become a 1L legal writing TA. At some law schools, 1L legal writing TAs receive a small stipend. TAs are typically required to attend the class for which they are the TA, and they have one or two "office" hours each week during the semester to see and help students. Any other work assigned would generally depend upon the writing instructor whom the TA is assisting.
- **RESEARCH ASSISTANT:** Another option is to be a research assistant to a professor. Often, research assistants have considerable flexibility as to when and where they do the work. Research assistants are often able to do some or even most of their work remotely. These positions may also be paid positions. Alternatively, some students opt to get course credit for the research work done for a professor. As a research assistant, you have an opportunity to forge a deeper relationship with a professor, particularly if she or he is working in an area of law in which you are interested in pursuing. Doing legal research, and sometimes even writing, in an area of interest to you will also enable you to develop a knowledge base that may well exceed that of your peers.
- **JOURNALS:** Journal participation is an excellent way to obtain legal experience that is valued by legal employers; it is also an integral part of law school. Journal staff is sensitive to the demands on evening students and the challenges they face. Some staff members, also evening division students, faced many of the same or similar issues you now encounter. Journal office hours can also be done in the evening. You also might want to think about writing a student note for publication.
- **MOOT COURT:** If you are interested in litigation, arbitration, mediation, or dispute resolution, consider participating in one of the advocacy-focused activities, such as Moot Court.
- **STUDENT GROUPS DOING LAW RELATED WORK:** Look into the various student groups that have law-related opportunities that may fit your schedule and interests.

Opportunities for Legal Experience Outside Your Law School

Current Employer: If you are currently working in a non-legal capacity, see if you can do legal work in some way with your current employer. The ideal situation would be one in which your employer has a legal department and you can actually be transferred or hired to work there to do law-related work. That is the obvious ideal situation. Alternatively, ascertain whether your employer has someone who oversees the legal function. This may be contracts driven or it may involve working with outside counsel on transactional or litigation matters for your employer.

For those evening students who may be able to take extended time off, consider doing an internship (no credit) or externship (credit) over the summer, or during a semester break.

Other Employment: If you are in a position to change full-time jobs, consider finding a job that is in the legal field. For example, if you are currently working as a medical lab technician, consider qualifying as a patent agent and getting a new job at a law firm doing patent-related work in litigation or patent prosecution. There are obvious pros and cons for making this type of change. If you are in a position to make such a change, check the job postings at your law school. You might also want to discuss your particular situation with a career counselor at your law school. Even if you are not seriously looking for a new job, regularly check the job postings at your school, as well as the listings on PSLawNet.org and idealist.org, as it is always advantageous to keep abreast of the opportunities that may be available to you.

Volunteer and Pro Bono Opportunities: Bar associations, law schools, and student groups often have a myriad of pro bono opportunities that can be done in one day or off-site at your convenience. As a law student, consider joining a bar association and apply for a committee membership. As a committee member, you would be expected to volunteer for assignments, such as helping to prepare a committee's report. Lawyers on the committee will get to know you, your work ethic, and your work product (be mindful that many committees expect you to be able to attend meetings, so be sure the committee meeting schedule matches your availability).

If your work schedule can be flexible¹, consider opportunities in the public sector (including state and federal government and the judiciary), which often can accommodate, for example, a part-time internship or externship. There are two annual public interest career fairs where you can meet the public interest and public sector organizations hiring and identify opportunities for gaining legal experience: the Equal Justice Works Conference and Career Fair in Washington, DC in late October, and the Public Interest Legal Career Fair at New York University School of Law in early February.

Article by Katharine M. Chen, Attorney at Law and Member of the Career Advancement and Management Committee, March 2012.

¹ Flexibility may include, e.g., the ability to work a four-day week or the ability to take extended time off, such as a sabbatical during a semester break or over the summer.