

The Value of Semester Internships

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Committee on Career Advancement and Management

It has been repeated and reprinted so many times that it's almost cliché: "Law school doesn't prepare you for real-world practice." Too much theory, say the critics, and not enough skill building. Too much time spent on appellate decisions, not enough focus on the trial courts where most lawyers actually practice. Too many obscure law journals, not enough time learning to write ordinary motions. Not nearly enough legal writing, research, communications, dispute resolution and negotiation in the curriculum.

Internships: The Value of Experience

With all these common complaints, one wonders how American law schools have managed to produce a single competent attorney. I won't waste time defending (or trying to defend) legal education, and I certainly cannot claim to be an expert on legal career advice. But I will say a bit about how I've tried to compensate for the inevitable holes in a law school education. As a student member of the New York City Bar's Committee on Career Advancement and Management, I've had the great fortune to be surrounded by career experts and practicing attorneys. Many agree with these sharp critiques of legal education, and advocate a single piece of advice for law students: work. Don't just go to your courses, they say. Get an internship on the side.

"But I have classes!" you might respond. "Where will I find the time? Besides, I just finished interning this summer! Why should I get an internship during the school year?" Two reasons. First, like it or not, many employers now want more than "just" law school educated students with one internship after their first year and a second internship after their second year. Second, semester internships give you opportunities to explore different practice areas at minimal risk. Most 1Ls enter law school with no conception of what a commercial litigator does, or what life is like as an in-house compliance attorney. Sure, intellectual property sounds prestigious and in vogue, but what exactly does a transactional IP lawyer do all day? The only way to really answer these sorts of questions is to go to the source. The problem is, summers give you limited time to explore. You might have a curiosity about family law, but don't necessarily want to commit to working at a family law firm during one of your precious two law school summers. A low-pressure semester-long internship can give you the taste you need to decide whether you want to dip further into the field academically and professionally. (For example, I interned with a financial services firm, and quickly realized that I had little interest in foreign exchange law.)

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Now in my second year of law school, I'm an intern with Garson, Ségal, Steinmetz, Fladgate LLP—a boutique firm specializing in intellectual property, international law, and commercial litigation. My time at Garson so far has been exceptional. Unlike my experience at the financial services firm, my time here has confirmed my passion for intellectual property, art and media law. I've reviewed contracts, drafted memos, and written client letters—exactly the practical activities that critics say law students never see.

On my very first day at Garson, an attorney gave me a 30-page music contract to review. An amusing fact dawned suddenly on me: Like every law student, I had taken a 5-credit course on contract law in which we never actually looked at a physical contract. Almost funny when you think about it. Naturally, I started reading the document with a twinge of fear. What exactly was I looking for, besides offer, acceptance, and consideration? I had very little sense of how to maximize benefits and minimize liability for our client. Sheepishly, I asked the attorney for some tips. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the attorney was willing to take me through the entire process. He sat at his desk, reading the document at the same time, and I highlighted clauses that stuck out to me or that puzzled me. He then came right next to me, and we went line-by-line, comparing notes on what changes we might suggest.

Could one ask for a better learning experience? Clearly, interning is giving me a practical training and apprenticeship that I could never gain in a classroom. Perhaps I am very lucky to be working with attorneys who are so willing to give me substantive work and mentor me on approaches. Luck certainly plays a role in any employment situation. But I've found that, when you accept an informal unpaid internship, your employers are willing to pay you with teaching.

How to Find Internships

Okay, so I've sold you on the tremendous value of additional practical experience. The next question: How do you find such an internship during the school year? You might be thinking that you have enough trouble going through the competitive application process for summer positions. How could you possibly go through all over again? I've actually found that firms, agencies and non-profits are far more willing to take on semester interns. In the summer, law students from all over the country are clamoring to get a fixed number of positions—particularly in legal capitals like New York. During the fall, winter and spring, far fewer law students are pestering these employers. After all, only students from the local schools could feasibly apply. Moreover, unlike the summer when legal internships are essentially mandatory, a far smaller percentage of students are interning during the school year. For both reasons, you have significantly less competition in securing a position.

Also, note that your internship certainly does not have to be with a law firm. Last fall, for example, I worked on Fridays at the New York City Council in the Legislative Affairs Division. There too, the summer interns had just left en masse, and they were more than happy to have some help.

So where can you find such an internship? Let me suggest three avenues that my friends and I have successfully used:

1. New York City Bar Public Interest Law Fair — This event, usually hosted in mid-September at the City Bar (on 44th street between 5th and 6th avenues), draws scores of government and non-profit sector employers. “Not another career fair!” you might be thinking. True, career fairs tend to have a fairly low success rate. *But* the good news about this career fair in particular is that all of the students are pestering the employers about *summer* jobs. Very few think to ask about semester positions. So while you mingle with various government agencies and non-profits, collecting scores of business cards, catch them by surprise. Ask them if they have interns right now and, if not, whether they might need one. This is exactly how I got the position at the New York City Council.
2. Law School Alumni Office – One resource many students overlook is their law school’s alumni office. Befriend the folks in alumni affairs and development. They have their collective finger on the pulse of alumni; it’s their job. There are more opportunities to interact with these offices than you might expect. For example, my law school needed student volunteers for their Annual Fund Phonathon. I signed up, did some calling, and quickly made several friends in the office. They now know my interests and also know (through Phonathon) that I’m hard-working. Alumni offices are generally also heavily involved in CLE events hosted by law schools. Attend these, and see if you can strike up a conversation with the staff. You might casually mention your interest in fashion law or maritime arbitration, and find that they can quickly rattle off the names of a couple graduates in the field who would be happy to help you.
3. Undergraduate Alumni — While we’re on the subject of alumni networks, don’t focus exclusively on law school. Think about your college. Oftentimes, folks are vastly more attached to their undergraduate college than to their law schools, and thus more willing to help fellow graduates make career decisions. I’ve heard from many law school alumni, and reiterated by members of the City Bar’s Committee on Career Advancement and Management, that their alma mater’s current students sometimes bombard them with requests. You might find that a graduate of your undergraduate school is much more receptive, particularly if you frame the conversation as wanting to learn more about their practice area. This is particularly true if you went to a smaller school. I went to Vassar, for example, a closely-knit school of only about 2,400 students. I’ve never met a single Vassar graduate who isn’t thrilled to chat and give advice to one of their own. In short, remember that your undergraduate alumni might be a useful resource in your quest for practical experience.

In Closing: Internships as Valuable Learning Opportunities

A few important caveats: Private sector employers must be sure that unpaid internships meet Fair Labor Standards Act <http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.pdf> requirements relating to the intern’s trainee status, so it may be worthwhile to be familiar

with them. Also, my advice is *not* to view semester internships as an “in” for summer associate employment. Many firms, judges and government agencies have fairly mechanized summer hiring, and might be unlikely to disregard that process to offer summer work to a semester intern. Lastly, if you can afford to, try not to worry about finding a paid internship. Not only will those be much more difficult to come across, but those employers might be less willing to give you meaningful practical skills training, since they are already compensating you monetarily. The goal of semester internships is truly to learn. No scheming. No sycophancy. No money-grubbing. Just learning practical aspects of the industry. Period. And hopefully you’ll also get a good reference out of the deal.

The truth is, law students feel perpetually inadequate. It’s an industry full of Woody Allens. This is partly because of the lack of “practical” exposure in the classroom. Yes, each class I take fills in a piece of the limitless legal puzzle I didn’t even know I was missing. And yes, there is so much to learn that law schools couldn’t possibly teach everything. But my suggestion for gaining some much-needed confidence in this challenging industry is to get your hands dirty as often as possible. Interning during the school year not only gives you more exposure and experience, but it also allows you to see connections between classroom theory and real-world practice. Most of all, being surrounded by lawyers might even give you the confidence to look yourself in the mirror and think, “Maybe I really can be an attorney.”

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