Your law degree opens the door to a variety of career options, both legal and non-legal. This handout gives an overview of legal career options. Considering a career outside of the law? Make an appointment with a Career Office attorney-counselor to discuss and plan your job search.

Most careers span 10-30 years. It is common to change employers and sometimes types of practice many times during a career—in fact, some experts say that today’s student will likely have at least ten jobs before the age of forty. Even those who know exactly what they wish to practice gain valuable insight by researching other practice areas, and being open to many different career paths.

Students can become familiar with different practice options via
- summer jobs
- externship and internship opportunities
- classes
- talking to professors about their practice areas
- attending panels sponsored by the Career Office
- networking with alumni
- meeting a mentor through the Alumni Mentor Program
- networking by becoming a student member of legal organizations
- networking through non-legal organizations
- reading trade publications like *The Recorder* or *The Daily Journal*.

**DO YOUR RESEARCH**

How did you choose your college? Your law school? Did you research your options and visit the schools? Did you have some ideas of the kind of environment in which you would thrive? Did you talk to people who had knowledge about schools you were interested in? Did you glean information from being around people – your parents, your teachers, your friends – who had gone to college and talked about what they knew? Do the same level of research now in determining what career to pursue.

**IDENTIFY YOUR SKILLS**

To paraphrase Richard Bowles, your job is the intersection between what you love and what needs doing in the world. You need to know what jobs are out there, and what you will thrive in doing.

To figure out what jobs might fit you, talk to lawyers who do what you think you might like to do. Ask them what personality types work well in their practice. What skills are the most important? What traits are common to the successful lawyers in their department (or firm or organization)? What do they love most about the work? What energizes them? On the flip side, what drains or challenges them the most and why? (What do you really want to know? Your curiosity will inspire the best questions. See the
Informational Interview handout for other reliable questions.)

Compare what you learn to what you know about yourself. If you need some assistance with identifying your strengths, your learning style and your needs, schedule a counseling appointment to discuss self-assessment. The Career Office offers MBTI and other self-assessment tools. (See the My Ideal Job handout to assess your strengths and interests on your own.)

NETWORK

Explore career options by meeting people who have knowledge of the employer/type of work you seek, and ask them questions. This gets your research started, and it lays the foundation for starting a professional network. Most law students get jobs through the people they know – friends, associates, professors, relatives, former employers. They do not have to be lawyers themselves, but they do need to know what you are seeking.

When meeting professionals as part of your research, remember to make a good, professional impression. Assume that every contact shows them a little of what kind of lawyer you will be – so show them the traits you have that have helped you get to law school and will make you a good lawyer. Be considerate, detail-oriented, responsible, timely, careful with your writing (including email!), curious and assertive.

To summarize: research types of employers, assess your strengths and needs, and network with lawyers and others who know about the kind of law you wish to practice.

OVERVIEW OF JOBS AND TYPES OF EMPLOYERS:

GOVERNMENT

Federal, state and local governments offer numerous legal and law-related career options. There are many advantages to government employment: the opportunity to work on issues of public significance affecting many people, advanced levels of responsibility, good job benefits, manageable work hours, and job security. The pay for government positions may be lower than in the private sector, but government employees generally have work-life balance, good benefits, and steady compensation that regularly increases.

Government lawyers sometimes find that their work is distinguished by the absence of an easily ascertainable client. Frequently the client is a conglomeration of public interests. For many attorneys this is a positive aspect of government practice, while for those who crave intense client involvement, it may be a negative.

*Federal Government.* Although the majority of legal and law-related positions in the federal government are located in Washington, DC, federal jobs exist in every state and in many foreign countries. Most federal agencies have regional offices here in the Bay Area (but entry-level attorney positions in those offices are rare or extremely competitive; most start in DC and lateral to a Bay Area office after a few years.)

Federal work varies according to the nature and mission of the agency. Specialties that are represented in the federal government include, but are not limited to, criminal law, admiralty, international law, taxation, finance, labor, energy, antitrust and civil rights. Federal attorneys are involved in administrative, regulatory and advisory processes, brief and opinion writing,
legislative drafting, research and review of special problems, and litigation at administrative, trial court and appellate levels. Federal agencies do not have uniform hiring policies and jobs often are under-advertised. Therefore, networking and creativity are an integral part of the job search plan.

For more details and how to apply, see the Federal Government Jobs handout. Law students should also see the Government Honors and Internship Handbook on HCO.

**Military.** The offices of the Judge Advocates General (JAG) of the military service recruit 200 to 300 attorneys each year to enter the military as commissioned officers. JAG officers are usually recruited directly from law school. A small number of openings occur each year for civilian attorneys in areas such as procuring government contracts, but these positions almost always require some legal experience after passing the bar. JAG officers serve on military installations throughout the world, representing service men and women in cases from courts-martial to disputes involving civilian matters. JAG officers generally enjoy a unique level of legal responsibility from an early stage in their careers. See the Federal Government Jobs handout for more details. Each military branch hires in its own way, so go to the particular website for more details. [United States Air Force JAG Corps](https://www.jag.mil), [United States Army JAG Corps](https://www.jag.army.mil), [United States Coast Guard JAG Corps](https://www.jag.uscg.mil), [United States Marine JAG Corps](https://www.jag.marinemil.com) and [United States Navy JAG Corps](https://www.jag.navy.mil).

**State and Local Government.** The lion’s share of government work for law graduates is in state and local government. District attorneys, public defenders, county counsel, city attorneys, administrative agencies and attorneys general are the most visible employers. Specialty fields include, but are not limited to: criminal law, environmental law, consumer law, municipal law, labor law, family law, education law and juvenile law. Additional opportunities are available in superior and municipal courts, and in school districts.

District Attorneys and Public Defenders tend to be the most visible of state and local attorneys. In addition, all local political sub-divisions at one time or another require legal representation on issues of land use, administrative law, taxes and finance, affirmative action, employment discrimination, state and federal constitutional principles, housing contracts and personnel. This work is conducted most often by city attorney and county counsel offices. These attorneys initiate and defend civil litigation for the entity they represent. They also provide advice on tax and other revenue measures, bond issues, contracts for the purchase of goods and services by public agencies, matters relating to public employees, the regularity and validity of local regulatory measures and a variety of other problems of local government. For small towns or counties, this work may be handled only on a part-time basis; in larger entities representation is handled by one or more full-time attorneys who function much like an in-house legal department in a corporation.

As with federal government positions, hiring procedures vary widely. Again, persistence and networking are two keys for finding employment in these areas.

For more details see our handout Applying for California State Government Jobs.
COURTS

The judicial system is a significant employer of attorneys, both in temporary (one to two year) clerkship positions and also in permanent staff attorney positions.

A judicial clerkship can be one of the most rewarding forms of public service open to recent law graduates. Clerkships are fundamentally legal research and writing positions, but they also generate a variety of marketable skills which differ by type of court. Typically law clerk duties include performing legal research, preparing bench memoranda, drafting orders and opinions, editing and proofreading the judges’ orders and opinions, and checking the accuracy of citations. Clerks frequently confer with judges regarding the disposition of pending cases.

Clerkships are available in federal and state courts of general jurisdiction, at both the trial and appellate levels, and in specialized settings including tax, bankruptcy, family courts and administrative tribunals. Most clerkships are for one year; some are for two years. Law firms and other permanent legal employers often defer employment while the graduate clerks. For more information on judicial clerkships, please refer Judicial Clerkship section of the UC Hastings website.

Permanent staff attorneys do work that is very similar to that of clerks, although they often develop an expertise in a particular area, such as death penalty defense work. The most significant part of their days will be spent reviewing case files and court transcripts, researching and writing bench memoranda and judicial orders or drafting decisions.

For information on the clerkship application process, which starts early in your 2L spring, attend the Judicial Clerkship Orientations and panel presentations. Also stop by the Career Office for additional resources describing the process and counseling regarding your candidacy. Fairuz Abdullah is the Associate Director for Clerkships in the Career Office.

If you are wondering whether you would be “competitive” for a clerkship or a permanent staff attorney position, research the courts and judges and talk with professors and other practitioners. For more information, see the How to Obtain a Judicial Clerkship handout.

PUBLIC INTEREST ORGANIZATIONS

Public interest attorneys generally get hands-on experience much earlier than most private sector attorneys, because public interest organizations, due to budgetary constraints, are leanly staffed. Another advantage to working in a public interest organization is that the work atmosphere is generally more casual and less hierarchical than in the private sector. For many public interest organizations law school grades are less emphasized in the hiring process than a demonstrated interest, work experience and commitment to service. Because of recent budget cutbacks, competition for jobs in this arena can be intense. For this reason, networking and some degree of geographic flexibility are extremely important.

An Overview of Traditional Public Interest Practice Areas

Legal Services offices are non-profit organizations that provide free representation to indigent clients in civil proceedings. The predominant legal aid issues are housing, government
benefits, domestic violence, and immigration. Some offices focus on a particular client community. The bulk of the work in legal services involves direct service to individual clients, but most programs also handle some impact litigation and community education.

**Private Public Interest Law Firms** are often small firm practices in which the lawyers have a common interest in a particular cause, policy or population. These lawyers devote a substantial portion of their practices to those, regardless of whether or to what extent they are paid for their work. Examples of these practices are discrimination (race, age, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), children’s rights and immigration practices. Often these lawyers devote some portion of their work to other more traditional types of practice to support their public interest work, but the cause-related work generally takes precedence. For more information, see the Private Public Interest and Plaintiff's Firm Guide by Harvard and Columbia’s law schools.

**Public Interest Litigation Organizations** specialize in class action and impact litigation. Most are non-profit organizations. Examples of public interest litigation firms include Public Advocates, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the ACLU, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Environmental Defense Fund. Some of these employers routinely list jobs with the Career Office and they occasionally recruit on campus. It is important to apply for summer or post-grad positions with these organizations early in the application period (August-November for some). Check carefully for deadlines. Openings for permanent positions are rare, but when they do arise, those who have already worked for the organization (e.g., through summer positions or post-graduate fellowships) usually receive preference.

**Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs)** are public interest advocacy organizations that concentrate on lobbying and research analysis. Court appearances are rare; they focus their efforts on policy-making. PIRG attorneys usually have a strong community base to function successfully. Much of their effort goes into coordinating campaigns to develop community support and education for particular issues of concern and relevance in that community. Like public interest litigation firms, a common mode of entry into these organizations is a one or two-year fellowship upon graduation. PIRGs will sometimes come to campus to promote their fellowships. Some summer positions exist for those with work-study funds. Semester programs may also be available. PIRGs are located in many states, including CalPIRG here in California.

To learn more about public interest work and access one of the largest public service databases, go to www.pslawnet.org.

**PRIVATE PRACTICE**

An attorney might enter private practice for a variety of reasons, including:

- desire for financial reward at larger firms;
- interest in a specific practice area (e.g., intellectual property, employment)
- desire to work with a particular type of clientele (e.g., high-profile clients, corporate or industry clients, etc.)
- desire to be one’s own boss and enter solo practice
Law firm practices vary by type of client, specialty, and size.

**Large and Medium Size Firms:** Most large and medium size firms practice a variety of specialties in a framework of general commercial civil law. Large firms usually serve corporate clients or large trade associations, although there are exceptions.

In terms of hiring criteria, some large law firms tend to recruit students and even lateral associates using a high class rank as selection criteria. By contrast, many small and medium size firms are more interested in a candidate's work experience.

**Small Firms and Solo Practice:** Small firms and solo practitioners have either a fairly broad general practice or a narrow "boutique" practice. Estate planning, small business practice, personal injury, environmental, civil rights, family, juvenile, immigration, criminal, and labor and employment law are some areas that may be covered by a small firm or solo practitioner.

Lawyers in small firms gain hands-on experience in a short period of time. For those with an entrepreneurial or independent streak, a small firm or solo practice is highly attractive. In fact, professional surveys show that small firm or solo practitioners are some of the happiest practitioners. For more information, see the Small Firm Search Tips handout.

**CORPORATIONS**

Many corporations have their own legal departments or in-house counsel to handle their legal needs. The size of these legal departments varies. Some business organizations have large legal departments divided into specialty areas. Other organizations may have one-person legal departments.

An attorney in an in-house legal department is often a generalist. Many in-house lawyers find themselves engaged just as much in the management of the business as they are in its legal affairs. In-house attorneys oversee work being performed by outside counsel and may find themselves working on general business litigation, employment and labor law, corporate and bankruptcy law and securities and tax law.

While in-house salaries are generally higher than those in small firms, they still lag behind large firm salaries. In-house positions were once coveted because the hours were less than in private practice and job security was strong. Increasingly, however, corporate attorneys state that their work schedules coincide with those of private practitioners and that job security is no longer a sure thing. One significant reason why corporate counsel positions are still attractive is that the attorneys feel they have a guiding role in the day-to-day business of the organization.

Some corporations operate summer clerkship programs. Check [HCO](#) for the Bay Area In House Legal Department Guide and the Resources for In House Externships Guide. Even if a corporation does not operate a formal summer program, by all means contact their legal department directly. You may be able to market a specific skill or previously acquired experience. Just make sure you will be getting legal experience and are supervised by an attorney.
ACADEMIC POSITIONS

Faculty Positions

Many students are fascinated by the academic side of the law and decide to pursue a teaching position. Some are attracted to the opportunities for research and writing. Others are drawn to the attraction of instructing others in difficult legal concepts.

If you are interested in a faculty position, you are strongly advised to attend the annual December recruitment conference sponsored by the Association of American Law Schools. Prior to the conference, AALS compiles a list of applicants which is sent to all participating law schools. Contact AALS directly for application materials.

Competition for faculty positions is intense. At many of the top law schools, a judicial clerkship is considered a prerequisite for the job. Once on the job, the maxim “publish or perish” can apply just as much to law faculty as to undergraduate faculty.

Administrative Positions

There are numerous opportunities open to law school graduates in administrative positions. Law schools hire JDs to serve as Assistant Deans whose duties range from supervising/teaching legal writing and research, counseling students on academic issues, coordinating continuing education programs, and supervising hiring of adjunct faculty. JDs are also seen in career offices, admissions offices and elsewhere in the administration. These positions are frequently advertised in the Chronicle of Higher Education and the AALS Placement Bulletin.

University Counsel/Affirmative Action and Judicial Conduct Officers

In-house counsel positions at law schools and universities have expanded dramatically in recent years. University counsel work with a variety of legal issues, including contracts, labor relations, intellectual property and tax, as well as education specific questions. Some universities also have specific positions created for specialists in affirmative action to provide guidance on campus policy and training programs and materials. Judicial conduct officers are quasi-legal in nature. They assist the student conduct boards in administering campus regulations and oversee student conduct proceedings.

The National Association of College and University Attorneys, located in Washington, DC, is the professional association for attorneys who work in academic settings. They publish a regular bulletin which lists current positions.