Legal Internships – Helping Students Become the Best Candidate for the Job

Employers look for workers with experience, so the best way for legal students to prepare for their future is to take advantage of internship opportunities while they are still in school. Legal internships can teach students valuable skills that can work for them by boosting their résumé and helping them to become the best candidate for the job.

Doris Rachles, online director of Legal Studies for South University — Savannah says that it’s never too early for Legal Studies and Paralegal Studies students to begin looking for legal internship opportunities.

“The best way to find one is to network everywhere you go,” Rachles says. “Talk to everyone you meet or know and ask them if they know a lawyer who would be happy to get some free help, in exchange for teaching a student eager to learn.”

Patty Dietz-Selke, student outreach coordinator and vice president of the Georgia Association of Paralegals, advises students to get involved with their local paralegal association. She says this is a great source for networking, pro-bono volunteer opportunities, and training classes. Involvement in these associations can also be a great way to find legal internship opportunities.

Rachles says that the internship is the most important part of the education for Legal Studies and Paralegal Studies students.

“The internship is the opportunity for Legal Studies and Paralegal Studies students to put together what they learned in class and see how it all works in the real world,” Rachles says. “It gives the students the chance to meet challenges when it comes to getting along with people on the job, from clients to support staff, to attorneys.”

Rachles says that while interning, students must dress professionally, just as any other member of a legal team.

“They often get to go to court with their attorneys so they can see what happens after they do research and draft documents,” she says.

A legal internship can really be beneficial for those individuals that don’t have any prior experience.

During their legal internship, students get to follow procedures in a legal setting and work on cases, many times from beginning to end, Rachles says.

“At the end of this experience, most of my students feel the most important thing they learned was to have confidence in themselves,” she adds.

Dietz-Selke, who is also employed as a paralegal, says that having legal internship experience can give students a competitive edge over those without a similar background. The current economic environment has made legal internships much more competitive, because there are fewer job opportunities out there and more people are competing for them, Dietz-Selke says.

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Dietz-Selke says that internships are also a good place for students to network with legal professionals, because they have the opportunity to meet people that might be able to help them find jobs in the future.

“They can make contacts and mix and mingle with working attorneys and paralegals,” Dietz-Selke says.

Finding the Right Internship Opportunities

When searching for an internship, Rachles says that students should look for a place where they can find a mentor.
There has to be someone who is willing to take the student under his or her wing to give guidance and support,” Rachles says. “It is intimidating, at first, to step foot into a law office or legal setting. While internships run the gamut from legal departments at banks, to foreclosure defense to prosecuting criminals, and much more, the common thread is that if they do not have a site supervisor who will help them learn, they will not have the best possible experience.”

Dietz-Selke says that students should determine who they wish their ideal employer to be, perform a due diligence on a company before looking for jobs with them, and determine what their priorities are with employers.

“Match up what your interests and priorities are to get your legal internship,” Dietz-Selke says. “This goes for fields as well. Do background research to figure out what you’re looking for.”

Dietz-Selke advises students to remember that finding an internship is a two-way street; they are also interviewing the company to see if it’s a good fit for them.

Learning From a Legal Internship

Rachles says the ultimate goal of an internship is for the student to both learn and be helpful to the employer that they are working for.

Dietz-Selke says that intern work ranges anywhere from gopher work and being a runner, to doing receptionist work, to assistant paralegal work, to full paralegal work.

She advises students to determine what their responsibilities will be when negotiating a potential internship with an employer.

“Making copies and getting coffee for people isn’t a viable internship; it’s not serving students’ best interests,” Dietz-Selke says. “Make sure the idea is that you get some actual meaty paralegal experience,” Dietz-Selke says.

Dietz-Selke says students should discuss their internship responsibilities with potential employers before taking the job, so they understand what is expected of them.

“Always do the best to set yourself up for success and not failure,” Dietz-Selke says.

Employment Potential After a Legal Internship

Dietz-Selke says that companies sometimes hire interns for full-time employment after they have completed their internship, but she advises students not to get their hopes up.

“Don’t walk in with the expectation that just because I got the internship they’re going to hire me,” Dietz-Selke says.

She says that receiving an offer for full-time employment is the most positive and most ideal outcome, but students should be realistic with their expectations.

She advises them to discuss the situation upfront to see if there is a possibility of gaining full-time employment.

“Unless you ask the question, you may not get that answer,” Dietz-Selke says.