

Networking to Get (or Create) a Public Interest Job

by Tracy J. Simmons

With the downturn in the economy, the number of economically eligible clients and the demand for legal aid services are increasing. At the same time, the second largest source of legal aid funding has decreased a dramatic 75% from 2007 to 2009, resulting in reductions in legal aid attorneys nationwide. (See “Expand Legal Services Now” by Emily Savner in *The National Law Journal*, June 28, 2010.) These factors together create a huge need for legal services attorneys but, given funding shortfalls, how does a new graduate successfully enter this field?

Networking is critical to getting a job in the tight-knit public interest community where most legal professionals know one another. With the Equal Justice Works Conference and Career Fair fast approaching, now is a great time to share networking tips and motivate students in their pursuit of a public interest career.

Networking Ideas for Students Pursuing Public Interest Careers

Engage in shared activities with public interest practitioners. Research suggests that some of the most effective networking opportunities are “shared activities,” or unscripted events focused on a common point of interest, such as volunteering at a soup kitchen. People at such events are more likely to engage in genuine conversation and get to know one another better. (See “How to Build Your Network” by B. Uzzi and S. Dunlap in the *Harvard Business Review*, December 2005.) The shared activity approach is particularly

well-suited for the public interest field, which is brought together by a common desire to serve the community, and student organizations could proactively plan such events. Students who are already volunteering could use those activities as an avenue to foster personal connections with lawyers.

Get involved with public interest student groups. Public interest employers prioritize candidates who demonstrate a commitment to public interest. Getting involved is a great way for students to build their public interest résumé, meet other students with similar interests, and meet alumni and public interest practitioners. One student learned about a new team forming at a local legal aid office from another student involved in public interest activities, and was able to connect with that team and successfully write a fellowship proposal as a result.

Attend public interest career fairs. Public interest job fairs, such as the Equal Justice Works Conference and Career Fair and other school-specific or regional career fairs, are an excellent way for students to connect with potential employers. Students should be prepared with a brief introduction so that they can concisely and professionally present themselves, their skill set, and their goals to employers during unstructured table talk.

Connect with practitioners in the public interest community. Whether through informational interviewing, mentoring programs, volunteering, or alumni networking, connecting with public interest practitioners is critical for students. The public interest community is a small world, and con-

necting with others is good for both learning about job opportunities and meeting the practitioners likely to be colleagues and mentors as students join the profession.

Follow up and stay connected. After making a connection with a public interest employer, encourage students to keep in touch. This will ensure that employers know the student remains interested and is still seeking public interest employment. Students can maintain their relationships by sharing articles of common interest, inviting practitioners to law school events, or updating practitioners about courses they have completed.

So, how can career services professionals motivate students to follow these networking suggestions? One way is by demystifying networking itself, which students often perceive as an uncomfortable process they would prefer to avoid. Networking is about connecting with other people in a meaningful and thoughtful way. It is not one-size-fits-all, and students should network in a way that works for them. Students can easily build connections in many ways, including volunteering through the local bar association's new lawyer or pro bono groups. Having a more realistic concept about networking will help motivate students

and allow them to think through a networking plan that meets their personal style and career goals.

Another great way to motivate students is to tie public interest networking to the end result they are seeking: a job. Fellowship projects, often initiated by law students, are a gateway into public interest employment. While public interest employers may not have the funding to hire new attorneys right now, they typically welcome new employees who bring their own fellowship funding. Even if students do not obtain fellowship funding, they have still connected with potential employers.

In this difficult job market, the ability to create job opportunities in partnership with employers will help motivate students to build their professional network. By proactively making meaningful connections with others in this tight-knit community, students greatly increase their odds of finding or creating a public interest job.

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