A Student Guide to Human rights at Columbia Law School

Prepared for the exclusive use of Columbia Law School students and graduates.
This document is the result of a student-led effort to produce a detailed guide on how to approach human rights as a JD student at Columbia Law School. There is a rich, multi-generational community of human rights and social justice advocates connected to the law school. That community sustains and guides our work as advocates and engages in critical, cutting-edge advocacy around the globe. This guide was prepared by current students, alumni, professors, and advisers who are deeply committed to this community, and who want to see as many students as possible succeed in achieving their human rights goals and have the opportunity to engage in the work we so deeply care about.

Because there is no one clear path to entering the human rights field, this is an attempt to map out the available tools and resources in one document so that you can make informed decisions about how you spend your time at Columbia. There is no reason not to do everything on this list. Keep in mind that this guide is a student-led effort; where appropriate it also contains crosslinks to official CLS information.

The first section includes a brief note on community, solidarity, and broad strategic approaches to law school. The second section is a chronological list of what steps you could take during each of your three years at Columbia. The final section is a short compilation of some available resources for more information.

Special thanks to B. Khawaja for spearheading this guide.
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A note on community

In setting out a series of individual steps that you can take while in the law school, this document at times does not do justice to the importance of the human rights and public interest communities at CLS. Working towards a career in human rights while in a law school setting can at times be exhausting, frustrating, or discouraging. During those times, there is no substitute for the support of classmates, professors, and advisers who share your values and want you to succeed.

In a similar vein, be cognizant of what external perceptions you are creating. The human rights community is small, and in the law school setting you will generally know everyone else interested in this work. The way you choose to interact with fellow students, professors, and the administration will have an impact on how you are perceived for years to come. Strong relationships are essential to effective human rights advocacy and your fellow students will soon be your colleagues after graduation. With students working towards the same leadership positions, summer employment, or post-graduate fellowships, there is some inherent level of competition. It’s worth thinking carefully about how you navigate those tensions to preserve important relationships and continue to build what has become a vibrant, thoughtful, and deeply supportive community within the Law School.

Your approach to law school

Early on, as you are beginning the law school process, it’s worth thinking through what you want to develop during your three years here—what knowledge, tools, relationships, and experiences you want to leave with and what causes you want to work towards. Which opportunities will help you to be in the best possible position to move into work that will help advance human rights goals and be personally and politically fulfilling? Depending on what approaches to human rights you are interested in, there are certain skills that will be essential in becoming an effective advocate and excelling in work that you find meaningful after graduation. These may include interviewing, field research, report-writing, strategic thinking and planning, litigation, brief writing, media work, government engagement, advocacy, UN work, and working within teams or as a part of a coalition. You should also think about what relationships and communities will be important for sustainable human rights work and what type of public profile you should begin to develop so that you can be an effective advocate within the larger human rights movement. As a CLS student, you will have the opportunity—especially when participating in clinics or externships—to leverage that status to open doors for meaningful human rights work as a student and after graduation. Developing a well thought-out plan early on means that you’re in the best possible position to seek out relevant opportunities and take advantage of them as they arise.

A step-by-step guide to each year of law school

The following list breaks down what steps you should take and what opportunities are available during each of your three years at CLS. This is not an exhaustive list, but an attempt to compile some of the most important information in one place—you should continue to seek out information from as many sources as possible. Keep in mind that when seeking out information or advice, much of what you hear might be contradictory, incomplete, or even incorrect. It is therefore important to continuously consult with multiple people in order to get a complete picture to make your decisions.
1L Year

*During the academic year*

- **Engaging with the community:** Early on in your first year you should get to know the human rights and broader public interest community at CLS. Student groups such as Rightslink (human rights) or SPIN (the Student Public Interest Network) will host early orientation events that you should attend. Social Justice Initiatives (SJI) and the Human Rights Institute (HRI) host social events throughout the year, and you should also keep an eye out for emails about human rights informational sessions. In general you should attend as many of these as possible to get the best sense of what is available. Each session will likely include useful information not available in other sessions, such as upcoming internship opportunities. Finally, SJI, student groups, and HRI will host small career talks throughout the year, intentionally limited to small groups of students, in which you can engage directly with human rights practitioners in various stages of their careers. Students do not always take advantage of the fact that practitioners often stick around after their talks, and you should absolutely feel comfortable engaging with them one-on-one if they have the time. If not, you can always get a business card and follow up by email.

1. **Mentorship:** Mentorships are a useful way to effectively acquaint yourself with the human rights community. In addition to the CLS student mentors, SPIN and Rightslink run programs that will pair you with an upper-class student with similar goals and interests. Student organizations and journals usually have their own individual mentorship programs. Beyond student organizations, you should absolutely reach out to students or graduates with shared goals as they will likely be happy to make time for you. Do not hesitate to ask professors and CLS staff to put you in touch with students with shared interests.

- **Reaching out to professors:** The human rights professors at CLS are very supportive and committed to mentoring a new generation of human rights lawyers. You should get to know the HRI faculty/staff as soon as you start at CLS. You do not need to be in a professor’s course in order to meet with him or her about law school, human rights work, and summer internships. That said, when reaching out to professors (and the same goes for career advisers), you will have the most productive interactions when you have done the preliminary work and thinking yourself. Approach these meetings as a way to build on your own work and develop knowledge rather than a way to get initial answers to basic questions that could be largely resolved through independent research. But having done the initial legwork, don’t hesitate to seek input from professors.

1. Note that adjunct professors will likely be a little more busy and difficult to get a hold of. Since many of them may work for major human rights organizations, you can learn a lot from meeting up with them outside of class.

2. Do not limit yourself to professors and staff at the law school. Columbia University, SIPA, and Barnard all have an impressive array of professors with human rights expertise, and they will likely be happy to meet with you. Other institutes or groups working on human rights include the Institute for the Study of Human Rights, the Human Rights Graduate Group, the Human Rights and Humanitarian Policy Concentration at SIPA, and the SIPA Human Rights Working Group.

- **Student organizations:** Student groups are one of the best ways to engage with human rights work as a 1L. They are an opportunity to develop important skills and relationships, demonstrate
interest and commitment, may have career or mentorship resources, and often do not require a very substantial time commitment as a 1L. Some will allow you to work with clients and participate in struggles for justice as early as 1L year. A full list of student orgs can be found here. Some of the human rights student groups that you may want to consider include:

1. Rightslink (human rights umbrella group)
2. Society for Refugee Rights (SIRR)
3. Columbia Society for International Law (CSIL)
4. Student Public Interest Network (SPIN)

- **Human Rights Career Fair**: This is an annual collaboration between Rightslink and SJI, bringing major human rights NGOs to campus so that students can speak with employers, get to know individuals at the organizations, and submit resumes. The Fair usually takes place before 1Ls are allowed to apply for jobs (generally sometime in October) and so is geared towards 2Ls and 3Ls—but you should still attend, get to know the organizations, and then follow up when you are permitted to communicate with employers, after December 1. Rightslink and SJI will send out a list of participating organizations prior to the event, and you should do your research before speaking to representatives. Many human rights employers attend the fair annually and consistently hire CLS students, so this is an excellent opportunity to begin expanding your network of human rights practitioners in the New York City area.

- **Apply for HRIP**: The Human Rights Internship Program provides all qualifying students with a plane ticket anywhere in the world and a stipend for 10 weeks of summer work in human rights outside of the United States. The deadline for the HRIP application, which is short and easy to complete, is in early November. You should absolutely submit this application—you can always drop out of the HRIP program, but if you miss the deadline, you cannot opt in later except in extraordinary circumstances.

- **Also apply for GSF**: The Guaranteed Summer Funding Program provides students with a stipend for public interest or government summer work in the United States or abroad. Students who work at a human rights organization in the United States or for an international public law organization anywhere receive GSF, not HRIP funding. Keep in mind that all HRIP applicants must apply for GSF, meaning that if you do not sign up for GSF you will not be able to participate in HRIP. GSF funds 1Ls for 8 weeks of work for domestic public interest work and HRIP students for international human rights work.

- **Sign up for PILC Fair**: Every year, the Public Interest Law Center at NYU hosts the Public Interest Legal Career Fair with over 200 organizations, some of which are human rights organizations. The Fair is typically held in February, but sign-up takes place earlier (usually in November). Many 1Ls obtain their summer internships at the Fair, so look out for SJI e-mails regarding registration.

- **Pro Bono and RA work**: Throughout the year, there will be opportunities to engage in human rights work or research outside the classroom. Student organizations like the Domestic Violence Courtroom Advocates Project or the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project provide opportunities to work with clients and engage in legal advocacy early on. Rightslink will periodically offer students opportunities to conduct pro bono research for human rights organizations around the world. Through Rightslink, you can also conduct research for Human Rights Clinic projects; this can be a very good way to learn about the Clinic and get immediately involved in ongoing work. Human rights professors at CLS will often need research assistants for their own projects and publications, which can be an incredible opportunity to work with faculty early on. The Human
Rights Institute also frequently posts requests for RAs on a wide variety of human rights issues in the U.S. and around the world. Make sure to look for such opportunities at the start of semester.

• **Choosing your elective:** You will get the chance to choose an elective for the spring semester of your 1L year. Human rights, lawyering for change, and international law courses are usually offered as an option, and this is an opportunity to start delving into course offerings and get to know professors. The early substantive knowledge can also be useful for summer employment. If you are concerned about taking a class alongside 2Ls and 3Ls, speak with the professor—this is usually not an issue, and 1Ls tend to do quite well in these classes.

• **Job application process:** As a 1L, you can begin applying for summer jobs on December 1. Because this coincides with first semester exams, most students will send out job applications over winter break—but keep an eye on application deadlines, as some (such as international tribunals) may be early. Even if you aren’t going to send out applications until later on, you should start researching the organizations you might be interested in earlier in the semester and making a note of deadlines. You do not want to start from scratch over the break. In your search, think strategically about the skills, relationships, and experiences you will want by the time you apply for fellowships or graduate, and consider how you can use both summers most effectively.

1. **Career advising:** As a part of the job search, you should reach out early on to career counselors at SJI. [Nyaguthii Chege](mailto:nychegelaw.columbia.edu) specializes in human rights and international public law. You should feel free to email her directly. In addition to full time counselors, SJI also employs a number of practitioners that do part time advising, some of whom may be doing exactly the type of work you are interested in. They will be able to give you more specific advice about certain postings, such as when application materials should deviate from the default law school templates. You should absolutely take advantage of this resource, and the adviser profiles can be found [here](mailto:). You should also reach out to the faculty and staff of the Human Rights Institute. HRI is full of practicing human rights lawyers who often mentor and advise CLS students.

   a. Career advisers (and professors) often mention that while students come in with the sense that they would like to do human rights work, they don’t always have a well-developed idea of what type of work they are interested in. These conversations will be most productive if you have already spent some time thinking through what substantive issues you might want to work on, where you would like to be based, what geographic regions you want to focus on, what motivates and drives you to do human rights work, what strategies or approaches align with your own theory of social change, and how you see yourself in relation to the global human rights movement. Looking at the websites of human rights organizations is a good way to develop a better sense of what possibilities are out there in terms of both substance and strategy.

   b. Check with SJI about job search resources. They publish both an International Job Search Toolkit and a Public Interest Job Search Toolkit. You should review these before meeting with advisers.

2. **Job search strategies:** While you should make use of the postings and databases provided by SJI, you should not confine yourself to them. Meet early on with multiple advisers and professors to discuss your interests, the types of skills or experiences you are looking for,
and which organizations might be a good match. Note that you should not confine yourself to posted internships—if you are interested in organizations or offices with no internship postings, you should absolutely reach out to them with a resume and a short email describing your background and interest. You may want to run these emails by an adviser, but in general: identify yourself, be specific about the type of internship you’re looking for, indicate the approximate dates, and clearly note that you are fully funded by CLS (including airfare) and do not need to be compensated in any way. You can generally find email addresses on organization websites or through Google, but it’s always useful to reach out to advisers, professors, and older students to see if anyone has a contact at the organization and is willing to put you in touch directly.

a. **Business cards:** Students can get official Columbia business cards here.

b. **Interviews:** If you are participating in phone or Skype interviews, ask SJI about reserving a conference room for the call. In addition, SJI holds annual mock interview programs with human rights practitioners that can help you build your interview skills.

c. **The SJI jobs database:** In addition to job listings, the database will also include a list of CLS students that have previously worked for each organization. Don’t hesitate to contact them and ask about their experience. They may also be willing to reach out to the organization on your behalf or put you in touch directly.

**Apply for student organization leadership roles:** Early in the spring of your 1L year, applications will open for student organization board positions. Student orgs have a substantial amount of autonomy within the law school, and this is an excellent opportunity to take on a leadership role within the human rights community. Note that unlike 1L membership, 2L board positions are generally a substantial amount of work, so you should be careful not to overstretch your 2L year. You will likely also be involved in a journal and a clinic or externship so it is important to be judicious with your time.

**Applying to clinics and externships:** Clinic and externships offer one of the best ways to contribute to social justice causes during the academic year while developing practical skills and experiences. You should read through all the course descriptions and speak to clinic directors, clinical fellows, and current/past students about the clinic and their experiences. Broadly speaking, externships place students within existing NGOs such as the Legal Aid Society or Bronx Defenders, whereas clinics operate more like independent NGOs situated within the law school. You should think carefully about the issues that trouble you, the strategies that inspire you, and the types of practical skills and experiences you want to develop, and then choose corresponding experiential options. Employers in the human rights field are looking closely at your skills and prior work experience, so you might consider doing some type of experiential learning during each of your semesters at CLS. Note that the human rights focused clinics typically receive a very high number of applications, so you will likely have to rank those clinics as your first choice in order to have a realistic chance of getting in. More information on clinics can be found here. Information about externships is available here.

1. **The Human Rights Clinic:** The Human Rights Clinic is one the best ways to engage with human rights theory and practice while in law school, and anyone serious about going into human rights work should absolutely apply. In addition to project work, the clinic seminar covers a broad foundation of human rights approaches, tools, skills, critical theory, and ethical dilemmas. It is an innovative and flexible space—clinic projects are often on
the cutting edge of emerging human rights issues and methodologies. Students work in small, highly independent groups, and are also offered the opportunity to participate in a mentorship program with a diverse group of practitioners. More information about the Human Rights Clinic can be found here.

2. **Credit caps:** There is a complicated limit on how many non-classroom credits you can count toward the 83-credit graduation requirement. Once you have an idea of which clinics and externships you would like to participate in, you should meet with someone at Student Services to make sure that you can take everything you want without exceeding that maximum.

3. **A note on independent internships:** Generally, it is not possible to get law school credit for an internship that you secure independently. However, if you take *Advocacy in Theory and Practice* with Professor Suzanne Goldberg and Madeline Kurtz (offered in the fall), you can apply up to 3 credits towards an independent internship either that same semester or the following one. Students have also obtained 1–2 supervised research credits by writing a paper on a theme related to their internship, under the supervision of a professor. Adjunct professors are authorized to give supervised research credit.

- **Applying to a journal:** Journal applications take place directly after the end of your 1L exams. In deciding whether to write on for *Columbia Law Review*, you may want to balance the prestige of the journal against the weekly 20-hour time commitment and decide how you want to spend that chunk of time over the next two years. Other journals such as the *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* or the *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* will require a substantially lower time commitment and may offer greater opportunities to publish or attain a leadership role on the editorial board. Many journals require or allow staffers to write and possibly publish a student note, providing you an opportunity to complete a piece of original academic writing and work closely with a faculty adviser.

- **Paying for bar prep:** Paying for bar prep courses can be expensive for human rights students who are not going to law firms. Many public interest students will work as student reps for bar prep companies in order to obtain a free course. You should also think early on about how you will cover living expenses during the summer after graduation, and may want to save a portion of your student loan each semester for that purpose.

**Summer work**

- **Preparation:** In addition to attending the HRIP programming, you should also start preparing independently for your summer position during the spring of 1L year. Based off the information gleaned during your interview, you will likely have some sense of what you will be working on. Begin to do background reading in order to prepare, and start following substantive developments as well as the local news. Review prior work that the organization has completed and have a sense of what major issues the organization will likely be focusing on. Before your internship begins, you may want to reach out to your supervisor to check in and inquire as to whether there is any additional reading or preparation that you should complete before starting. The goal is to come in prepared to hit the ground running so that you can make a meaningful impact on the important work of your organization. This will also demonstrate to your supervisors that you are serious, committed, and someone that can be relied on as a colleague.

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2 As of 2015, the person to meet with is Joel Kosman (joel.kosman@law.columbia.edu).
• **Summer work:** While there are obvious limits to the impact you will make in just eight or ten weeks, summer internships are an amazing opportunity to work as a member of a team addressing some of the most pernicious examples of injustice. Remember that. This work is not about adding a line to your resume. Your summer work is also essential to giving yourself the best opportunity to continue in these struggles throughout your career, developing skills, forming relationships, and continuously refining your own understanding of how you can best contribute to the causes you care about. If you keep this advice in mind, and are thoughtful in your interactions with everyone at your organization, you will not only make the strongest contribution to the work there, but will also earn the support of the individuals who will be in your corner to write letters of recommendation or flag your applications as you pursue opportunities throughout your career.

• **After the summer:** There may be ways to stay in touch after the summer, for example by continuing to volunteer on the organization’s projects, organizing a talk at CLS, or putting your organization in touch with Rightslink so they can take advantage of student research resources. Your organization may have a career listserv or Facebook alumni group that you can join to keep in touch and learn about future employment opportunities.

### 2L Year

• **Opt in to HRIP and GSF:** The 2L HRIP process is less stringent, but you will still need to opt-in by filing paperwork in November, and so should be aware of deadlines.

• **Job application process:** The 2L summer job process usually starts earlier, and students will generally begin submitting applications in the early fall. However, know that many students do not secure employment until the spring semester. International NGOs will vary greatly with regard to the timeframe in which they begin to fill internship positions, so while it may be safer to reach out early, know that some employers may ask you to resubmit later in the year.

• **Human Rights Career Fair:** As a 2L, you will have more opportunities to take advantage of the joint Rightslink and SJI Human Rights Career Fair (again, generally in October). You will be able to submit resumes, discuss internship opportunities, and the “table talk” can even turn into informal interviews. Rightslink and SJI will send out a list of participating NGOs prior to the event, and you should thoroughly research those you wish to speak with in order to make a strong first impression.

• **Journal board applications:** Journal board applications take place early in the spring semester. Board positions provide an opportunity to hone editing and leadership skills, and are often viewed favorably by employers.

• **Apply for clinics and externships:** See above on page 8.

• **Start fellowship application search process:** Fellowships provide the entry point to a career in human rights for most CLS graduates. You should not hesitate to apply for all fellowships that interest you and for which you satisfy the basic requirements. Fellowship deadlines range from early in the fall to late in the spring of 3L year, and so the end of 2L is a good time to start researching available fellowships and meeting with career counselors and professors to discuss possible options. If you are going to apply for one of the project-based fellowships, you will want to discuss your proposal with many people, and early on. SJI has past successful applicant proposals for the Leebro Fellowship on file that serious students may look through; these can...
Social Justice initiative at Columbia Law School

provide a starting point. SJI will host information sessions for the fellowships in the spring and early fall. If you cannot attend one of these sessions, be sure to email SJI so that advisers know that you are interested and make sure you receive important emails. See below for a list of the main human rights fellowships.

3L Year

• **Fellowship applications:** Most international human rights fellowships have deadlines in late fall or early winter. Early on, you should create a list of the fellowships that you are interested in, including their deadlines and requirements. Start your application materials early, as they can be stressful to complete late in the semester and deadlines often coincide with law school exams. It’s advisable to start early in the semester or even during the summer. You should give professors at least a month’s notice to complete letters of recommendation. If you have a good relationship with someone at the organization, you may want to reach out to them, let them know that you’re applying, meet up to talk about the fellowship, and—if appropriate—ask whether they would be willing to flag your application.

  • **Rightslink Career Fair:** Some of the NGOs that offer fellowships will be at the Rightslink and SJI joint Human Rights Career Fair in the fall. This is an excellent opportunity to make a strong first impression and to start developing a rapport with potential employers. Needless to say, you should thoroughly do your research beforehand.

  • **List of some human rights fellowships and jobs:** ([SJI fellowship list](#))
    - HRW Finberg (Open) and Sandler (CLS students only)
    - Open Society Foundations Presidential Fellowships
    - Center for Constitutional Rights Bertha Fellowship (2 year)
    - HRW/ACLU Aryeh Neier Fellowship (2 year)
    - ACLU fellowships
    - Leebron Fellowships (Columbia, project based)
    - Singer Fellowship (Columbia, project based)
    - Greater China Public Interest Fellowship (China based)
    - International Court of Justice Traineeship
    - UN Young Professionals Programme

• **Columbia Postgraduate Social Justice And Government Fellowships:** These fellowships provide a stipend to selected students in the graduating class who obtain a qualifying position at a public interest, human rights, or government organization anywhere in the world. Most of the students who start their careers with one of these fellowships obtain paid employment by the time the fellowship ends or soon thereafter. Although these fellowships may not be widely advertised, you should keep them in mind as a possible option. In previous years, the stipend has been $30,000. Some organizations may be willing to offer supplementary funding.

• **Interviews:** Fellowship interviews will likely be much more intensive than those for summer employment and you should work with someone who can prepare you by telling you the questions you are likely to be asked, and what the interview dynamics will be. Reach out to past interviewees (whether or not they got the fellowship) to talk about the application process. You should also do at least one mock interview with someone who does not
know you well. Students have organized their own interviews or asked SJI or HRI faculty or staff to set one up.

- **Parker certificate**: Watch for an email in the spring of your 3L year (generally sometime in February) about the [Parker School Certificate in International and Comparative Law](http://web.law.columbia.edu/social-justice). The certificate requirements are a very minimal 10 credits in classes relating to international law, but it is not widely advertised so be on the lookout for that email.

- **Enhanced LRAP applications**: The applications for the enhanced LRAP fellowships are distributed in late spring. These fellowships cover all loans up to the cost of law school attendance for fellows whose adjusted gross annual income does not exceed $100,000 (as compared to $50,000 for standard LRAP), spousal income does not count in the calculation of income, and the schedule of forgiveness is accelerated beyond that of the typical LRAP arrangement. The Lowenstein Fellowships are awarded to 2-3 graduates per year who will pursue any type of public interest law, including government service. The Berger and Bernstein Fellowships, which are given in alternative years, are awarded to one Columbia Law School graduate whose career and first postgraduate job (other than a judicial clerkship) will be substantially devoted to using the law to fight racial, gender, and/or other discrimination. More information about LRAP can be found [here](http://web.law.columbia.edu/social-justice) and [here](http://web.law.columbia.edu/social-justice).

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**Resources**

- **Facebook CLS human rights career group**
- **SJI social justice alumni database**
- **SJI weekly email listings**
- **SJI public interest career resources and publications**
- **PSJD job database**
- **Mentorship opportunities (student organizations, journals, clinics, spin)**