Once you decide to try public interest, a thoughtful self-assessment can help clarify what interests you. Below are some questions to help you get a better sense of what you might be looking for in an internship, pro bono opportunity, law school experience, or public interest career. You may not know the answers to all of these questions, and that is okay! Many people are not sure what exactly interests them; others are interested in everything. Additionally, most law students and lawyers find that their answers to these questions will change over time as their careers evolve.

**QUESTIONS TO ASSESS YOUR PROFESSIONAL GOALS**

**Why did you come to law school?**

- ______________________________________
- ______________________________________

**Who do you want to serve?**

- Individual clients
- Groups of individuals
- Communities
- Government
- Other

**How do you want to spend your time?**

- Conducting legal research and writing
- Investigative reporting and documentation
- Interviewing and representing clients
- Drafting legal education materials or policy manuals
- Appearing in court
- Alternative Dispute Resolution
- Meeting with clients
- Meeting with policymakers
- Engaging in oral advocacy
- Community organizing
- A little bit of everything

**What timeframe appeals to you?**

- Short-term projects with immediate results
- Long-term assignments, focusing on eventual systemic impact
- A mix of short and long-term projects

**Which characteristics are you looking for in a work environment?**

- Small office (fewer than 20 colleagues)
- Larger office (over 20 colleagues)
- Informal setting
- Formal setting
- Frequent travel
- Infrequent travel
- Support staff
- Flexible work schedule
- Multidisciplinary team
- Diverse staff
- Collaborative environment
- Frequent contact with media/public
- Open layout
- Traditional office environment
- Frequent communication with supervisors

**QUESTIONS TO ASSESS YOUR PERSONAL GOALS**

**What are your short-term and long-term career goals?**

- ______________________________________
- ______________________________________
- ______________________________________

**Where do you want to work?**

- U.S. (particular state/city__________)
- Abroad (particular country/city__________)
- Major metropolitan area
- Mid-size city
- Rural setting

**Do you have family/personal obligations that you need to consider?**

- Yes
- No

**How important is prestige to you?**

- Important
- Not a priority
How important is your level of income?
□ Important
□ Not a priority

QUESTIONS TO ASSESS YOUR INTERESTS
What have you found interesting in law school?
____________________________________
____________________________________
Outside of law school, what hobbies and activities have you been drawn to?
____________________________________
____________________________________

Which Legal Issues Interest You?
□ Access to Justice
□ Animal Rights
□ Arts/Preservation of Cultural Artifacts
□ Bankruptcy
□ Business and Human Rights/Corporate Accountability
□ Campaign Finance
□ Children’s Rights
□ Civil Rights
□ Community Development
□ Consumer Protection
□ Criminal Law (Prosecution, Defense, Death Penalty, Prisoner’s Rights, Criminal tribunals)
□ Disability
□ Domestic Violence
□ Economic Justice
□ Education
□ Elder Law
□ Employment/Labor/Work with Dignity
□ Environmental Law
□ Family Law
□ Financial Regulation
□ First Amendment
□ Food Security
□ Foreclosure
□ Government Accountability
□ Gun Control
□ Health and Human Rights
□ Homelessness
□ Housing
□ Immigration/Asylum
□ Indigenous Rights
□ International Human Rights
□ Judiciary
□ Juvenile Justice
□ Land Rights
□ LGBTQI
□ Mass incarceration
□ National Security
□ Native American Rights
□ Peace and Security
□ Poverty
□ Public Health/Access to Care
□ Racial Justice
□ Reproductive Rights
□ Sustainable Development
□ Transitional Justice
□ Torture
□ Voting Rights
□ Water Rights
□ Women’s Rights
□ Other

SKILLS
What skills, experience and knowledge do you have? Which skills would you like to develop?

Data Skills
Have □ Develop □
□ Analyzing, evaluating information
□ Assessing problems
□ Examining, observing
□ Investigating
□ Long-term planning
□ Organizing, classifying information

HTTP://WEB.LAW.COLUMBIA.EDU/SOCIAL-JUSTICE
People Skills

Have  Develop
☐ ☐ Advising, counseling
☐ ☐ Listening/Conveying warmth and understanding
☐ ☐ Oral communication
☐ ☐ Initiating relationships, networking
☐ ☐ Inspiring
☐ ☐ Interviewing
☐ ☐ Leading, managing
☐ ☐ Persuading, lobbying, advocating
☐ ☐ Mediating, settling disputes
☐ ☐ Mentoring
☐ ☐ Organizing, coalition building
☐ ☐ Presenting ideas clearly
☐ ☐ Teaching, training

Working with ideas

Have  Develop
☐ ☐ Conceptualizing
☐ ☐ Coordinating
☐ ☐ Designing, innovating, developing new projects
☐ ☐ Editing
☐ ☐ Explaining, synthesizing
☐ ☐ Implementing ideas
☐ ☐ Public speaking
☐ ☐ Strategizing
☐ ☐ Summarizing
☐ ☐ Troubleshooting

ADVOCACY TOOLS

Which organizational strategies and tactics appeal to you?
☐ Community organizing
☐ Impact litigation
☐ Policy advocacy and drafting legislation
☐ Client interviewing and counseling
☐ Media/social media campaigning
☐ Coalition building
☐ Courtroom advocacy
☐ Drafting amici briefs
☐ Investigating and reporting
☐ Designing legal training programs
☐ Public activism

VALUES

Which personal values are significant to your career planning?
☐ Activism
☐ Advancement/Achievement
☐ Adventure
☐ Calmness (in life, work environment)
☐ Civic involvement
☐ Collaboration
☐ Control
☐ Community
☐ Connection
☐ Contribution
☐ Creativity/Expression
☐ Diversity (perspectives, culture, people)
☐ Entrepreneurship/Innovation
☐ Fairness
☐ Fame/Status
☐ Financial security
☐ Ideological compatibility
☐ Independence
☐ Intellectual challenge
☐ Job security/Stability
☐ Justice
☐ Kindness
☐ Leadership
☐ Public Participation
☐ Service
☐ Social environment/Collegiality
☐ Variety (in tasks, projects, settings)

When you finish this exercise, reflect on your selections and use the information you have gathered to inform your job search. Read job descriptions carefully and evaluate potential compatibility based on these factors. Once you know the skills you want to develop, look for opportunities that will allow you to develop them. Use your values and goals to identify compatible practice settings and work environments. Apply to organizations and institutions that work on the issues you care about. Find opportunities to use the advocacy tools that resonate with you.

Tailoring your job search to fit the true you will pay dividends and lead to a much happier, more productive, and satisfying career.
Finding a Good Fit for You

You may not know exactly what you want to do and you may need to try different things before you find the “right” fit. We encourage law students to explore options by doing internships, externships, clinics, classes, pro bono, research, and work with student organizations. Each step will help you decide. It also is helpful to remember that you are not making decisions about your entire career. Practitioners often continue to explore by doing pro bono work, if in private practice, or by networking and working in coalition with other organizations to learn about other public interest practice areas. Many public interest lawyers change practice areas and even entire fields throughout their working lives.

**What might make me a good fit?**

Once you have a general idea of the type of public interest organization, practice area and/or advocacy mechanism that interests you, you should begin to consider how to make yourself a competitive candidate. In addition to building up your experience (see following section), there are other attributes that employers look for. You may already have some of these and you can develop them if you do not.

 Demonstrated commitment to the employer’s issues or the social good is an important criterion. Public interest employers want to hire people who believe in something and have done something about it. Public interest jobs are very competitive; it is often not sufficient to be a “good person” and have “good thoughts.” Having a genuine and demonstrated interest (such as past legal or non-legal work or volunteer experience in serving the public good) is very important. If your application additionally demonstrates a dedication to the issues the organization works on, the clients it serves, the organization’s theory of change, or the advocacy it does, you will be an even stronger candidate. No employer expects a new graduate to have vast experience, but you should work to build your experiences throughout law school. Similarly, graduates looking to switch fields need to build up their experiences to make themselves competitive in their new field. The more an applicant can demonstrate their dedication to an organization’s issues, clients, or advocacy approach, the more appealing that candidate will be.

Particular knowledge and skills can be helpful but may not be critical. Many public interest employers know that they will have to educate and train summer and entry level or even mid-career employees and are looking for the capacity and willingness to learn.

Different employers emphasize different things based on their particular issue areas and advocacy strategies – and you may have some of the things they are looking for. For example:

- Communication skills, such as interviewing or language skills, are often important to organizations that deal directly with clients, including immigrants, or engage in work with partner organizations
- Debate or public speaking experience and presentation skills are often important to organizations engaged in litigation, oral advocacy, and community organizing
- Research and writing skills are important to campaign-based organizations, advocacy groups and policy centers that draft laws, policy papers, legal briefs, or educational materials
Knowledge of relevant non-law subject matter can be important to advocacy organizations or institutions that focus on that subject matter. For example, a scientific or technical background might be important to an environmental organization; experience as a teacher is useful to an education advocacy or children's rights organization; and a public health background might be important to a women's rights organization.

Be prepared to make arguments as to why your particular skill set or background would be helpful to that employer, even if it is not exactly what they do. If you have personal experience with a legal issue that you are interested in working on (for example, you were in foster care and now want to work on children's rights, or you are a survivor of domestic violence and as a result are interested in working on women's rights issues) please meet with an adviser to discuss whether (and how to) include this information in your application. Some employers may view this as an asset while others may question your objectivity and view your application with caution. Although it can be useful to show familiarity with the issue, you should be careful about how much information you provide and limit the details of your own experience.

Initiative, responsibility and good judgment are very important. Public interest employers do not hire large numbers of law students and lawyers to simply follow orders and perform repetitive tasks. Interns and new lawyers often are given responsibility for their own matters and are expected to take the initiative. Employers seek those who can work independently, ask for help when they need it, and show good judgment when working on their own.

Enthusiasm counts. Employers like law students and lawyers who see the proffered job as a valuable opportunity to put their legal education and experiences to work. Even if you have not been trained in that country or issue, having enthusiasm and interest for their approach goes a long way. Be prepared to offer specifics about why you want this internship or job.

Character is important. Most public interest organizations are small, and people work intensely long hours often with little financial reward. One of the benefits is working with others they trust, respect, and whose company they enjoy. Be prepared to convey in your cover letter and demonstrate in the interview that you are someone they would enjoy working with and upon whom they can depend.

Grades are often important to public interest employers but they dominate decisions less often than they do for private sector employers. However, certain employers, including some judges, impact litigation organizations, public interest law firms, and government agencies may be particularly interested in grades and/or journal work.

Your online profile is relevant. Always consider every entry in social media as if it were publicly posted, out of prudence. Employers may “google” prospective employees, or check Facebook and other online sites to gain information. Employers will be wary of candidates with inappropriate profiles, pictures or information. Actively monitor your profile, and delete any inappropriate content.