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Law School Report

Outside chances

Expanded externship program provides practical experience

In UB Law's growing externship program, the work is genuine; the pay is in academic credit, not dollars; and the experience is priceless. Twenty-five to 30 students each semester take advantage of the opportunity to work in externship placements, said Lise Gelernter, a member of the teaching faculty and director of the program. Students can take only one externship in their Law School careers. Placements involve eight hours of work each week on site and regular reports to a faculty supervisor.

Gelernter, who has run the program since the summer of 2006, said new semester-long opportunities continue to be added to a list of options that includes dozens of possible judicial clerkships, legislative externships, and other non-profit and government work. Most are in Western New York, but the option to arrange summer externships means students have worked in Rochester, Philadelphia, New York City, even Chicago and Seattle.

"We network at every opportunity," Gelernter said. "It may be that a judge hears from one of his colleagues how well an externship has worked out in his office, and calls us. Sometimes alumni hear about the program and call us. Or a non-profit calls the Career Services Office and says, we do not have a paying job but we can host a student for credit. This is part of the University's and the Law School's civic engagement mission as well."

Second- and third-year students are eligible, though judicial clerkships are offered only to third-years, she said. Not everyone who applies to the program is accepted; students have to maintain a B average, and there is a screening process that includes a review of the student's transcript and resume.

In addition to Gelernter, faculty who supervise externships include Barry Boyer, Makau Mutua, Dianne Avery and Jim Milles. The administrator for the program is Donna McClellan, assistant to the dean for special programs.



Lise Gelernter counsels a student.



“They work hard, but it is a very different kind of work from academic work.”

– Lise Gelernter, adjunct associate professor and director of the externship program

The school also offers a field placement in Social Security disability law, in which students work in federal District Court to review administrative decisions by the Social Security Administration regarding disability benefits. Unique in the externship program, this placement requires that students be enrolled in the bridge-term course Social Security Disability Law and Practice. The work takes place during the bridge term: 24 hours a week in chambers for four weeks.

Spring 2008 offerings include placements with the City of Buffalo and the Town of Wheatfield, the U.S. Attorney’s Office, U.S. Customs & Border Protection, the UB Law Library, the International Institute, and more.

“They work hard, but it is a very different kind of work from academic work,” said Gelernter, who welcomes contacts (gelernt@buffalo.edu) from alumni who know of placement opportunities in non-profit or government situations.

Conversations with a handful of students who have benefited from externship placements reveal enthusiasm for the experience.

“It was definitely worth it,” said Alex Colicchio, who with two other UB Law students worked in the bridge-term Social Security placement in January of his second year. “If I could take all externships, I would. You learn a lot more being around lawyers than sitting in a classroom and being a passive observer.”

Colicchio explained that the work involves examining appeals by individuals who have been denied Social Security disability benefits by an administrative law judge, and have appealed the denial in federal court. Students helped plow through a huge caseload by reading the appeal petitions, drafting possible decisions, and discussing those drafts with Judge Michael Telesca and the judge’s law clerk.

“He trusted us a lot,” Colicchio said of the judge. “By the time we got to the Social Security program, we knew what we were doing.”

“The administrative law judges’ caseload is enormous. For them to go through all the cases and examine them in depth – sometimes they can just miss something. You really have to keep a very critical eye.”

In the fall semester of 2007, third-year student Brad Lachut indulged his passion for politics through an externship with the Erie County Legislature.

Working directly with the legislature’s chief of staff, Sean Ryan, Lachut said the work is varied: everything from doing re-



Extern Shannon Elwell '08 at the Federal Courthouse with, left to right, George C. Burgasser, assistant U.S. attorney, and Michael DiGiacomo, assistant U.S. attorney.

search to sitting in on committee meetings and legislative sessions. He has worked on issues related to the county budget, he said, such as preparing questions to be asked at the budget committee, and checked proposed revisions to local laws before they went before the lawmakers for approval.

“Mr. Ryan has been great,” he said. “He gives me a lot of guidance, but also lets me do my own thing. The time involved is more hours than in the classroom, but there is not really any outside reading or outside exams, so it probably works out to be about the same amount of work.”

A bonus, Lachut said, is that he has made a lot of contacts for the future. “You do make connections,” he said, “so it is good experience, and you are meeting a lot of people in your field.”

“I am disappointed I can only do one externship.”

For third-year student Shannon Elwell, who spent the fall semester of 2007 working in the U.S. Attorney’s office in Buffalo, her externship was a point of entry into the world of federal prosecution that she hopes to join after graduation. In the company of a half-dozen other UB Law students, she has seen firsthand the work involved – and done her share of it.

“I got to argue in federal court before I

even graduated from Law School,” she said. “The externship is really a great way to get your feet wet, because they literally say, ‘Here are the files’ and throw you in there.”

The experience, she said, has included attending proffer agreements, where the government offers a plea deal to a defendant in exchange for information in another case. (“It is like stuff you would see in the movies,” Elwell said.) And there are research projects in which the students look at case law and write a memo proposing a course of action in a given case.

“What is cool,” she said, “is they have work for us to do, but also when there is not work to do, they say, come along with us on whatever. They primarily like for us to learn by doing. They will take us with them wherever they go and whatever they do.”

Elwell has applied to the Department of Justice’s honors program – the only way to work in federal prosecution right out of law school. She’s also interviewing at district attorneys’ offices for prosecutorial positions.

Even in those applications, she said, the externship experience helps, because she has passed a background security check. “Going into the interview,” she said, “that is a huge plus.”