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Internships Aplenty: More Federal Judges Welcoming Our Students to Their Chambers

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Internships aplenty
More federal judges welcoming
SUNY Buffalo Law students to their chambers

This summer is shaping up to be an extraordinary one for SUNY Buffalo Law students with an interest in how the courts work.

An unprecedented number of first- and second-year students have accepted summer internships with judges. The placements are at all levels of the judicial system, but especially notable is the surge of interns in the chambers of federal judges — many of them SUNY Buffalo Law alumni themselves.

While judges in the Western and Northern Districts of New York often hire SUNY Buffalo students as summer law clerks, this year the national reach will expand. Buffalo students will work this summer with U.S. District Judge Jeffrey S. White ‘70 in the Northern District of California; with U.S. District Judge Cynthia M. Rufe ‘77 in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania; with U.S. District Judge Paul L. Friedman ‘68 in the District of Columbia; and with U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Julio M. Fuentes ‘75 in the Third Circuit, who hears cases in Philadelphia. Fuentes will have four SUNY Buffalo Law interns this summer. He has been taking a large number of Buffalo students for many years.

“Internships in federal courts tend to be highly visible, highly regarded opportunities that can be profile-raising for students’ resumes,” says Marc Davies ’03, associate director for career services. “These students are landing positions in very competitive geographic markets. Many of the students who are going to go into judicial clerkships are perhaps not interested in the courts as a career but as a stage of education, a short period of experience that will help make them better attorneys and more attractive candidates to employers nationwide.”

This summer’s successes reflect work by Davies and the Career Services Office to help students get a foot in the door. “I am a connector of sorts,” he says. “In the fall we get on the phone and call more than 70 federal judges throughout the Northeast, and ask if they are willing to accept applicants. At the same time, we are gauging the level of interest of first-year law students by meeting with each one. We advertise those opportunities to our students and advise them through the application and interview process, and the faculty weigh in on their relative writing abilities.”

Typically, he says, crossing the threshold for the first time with a judge is the hard part. “Getting the opportunity opened up to your student is the first order of business,” Davies says. “But then beyond that, if the judge is going to continue to consider applicants, those who come into chambers have to perform at a high level.”

The SUNY Buffalo Law connection shared by some federal judges, he says, “may make them a little more inclined to consider our applicants. They understand that you have top performers at law schools throughout the country, and not just the most visible law schools. They’re giving an opportunity for this meritocracy to take shape.”

The experience that students gain is manifold: exposure to the judicial decision-making process, experience with the different actors in the court system, the opportunity to develop mentoring relationships, the chance to get a foothold in the geographic area where they want to practice. And there’s no substitute for the intensive research and writing that is the substance of these in-
ternships. “In many cases,” Davies says, “they have the opportunity to test and develop the depth of their analytical ability to really get a sense of how legal problems are thought about and resolved.”

That was how it was for Joseph Jansen ’12, who now practices corporate law with the international firm Freshfields. His internship in summer 2010 with Judge Fuentes was, he says, “a phenomenal opportunity.”

“We basically did what the clerks did, under their guidance,” Jansen says. “You would research the law on whatever case you were assigned, and then you would read the briefs both sides submitted, then eventually do drafting. The judge would make the decision on whether the case was going to be upheld or overturned, and we would do the initial draft of how that would look. The judge would meet with us and go over our writing and what he liked and didn’t like. We would be going back and forth with the clerks as well. It really kept you on your toes, knowing that these incredibly smart clerks and the judge would be looking at what you’re doing.

“It was definitely intimidating,” he admits. “You’ve gone through just a year of law school. I didn’t even really know how the whole process worked, but you pick that up pretty quickly.”

Davies notes that the internships typically are unpaid. “The better our students do in these jobs, the more the reputation of the school’s program is going to spread throughout the chambers in those districts,” he says. “But it does come with a cost. There are very limited fellowship opportunities available. Some students are able to get course credit, so they can get student loans for that time. Some students work second jobs to help support themselves. . . . We are talking about making this a giving opportunity, exploring and developing funding to support fellowships for high-achieving students.”

The federal district court internships come on top of other opportunities for students. In past years (including last year) federal Magistrate Judge Lois Bloom ’85 has hired SUNY Buffalo Law students as interns in the Eastern District of New York, as have State Supreme Court Judge Joan Kenney ’85 and First Department Appellate Justice Judith Gische ’80 in New York City. In the past three summers, more than 120 students have interned with judges, Davies says.

In addition, the school’s extensive externship program, run by Lise Gelernter, sponsors placements typically during the school year, some of them with judges.

And a large program that spans the 8th Judicial District places about 20 first- and second-year students each summer with judges and courts throughout Western New York – family court, city and county courts, and State Supreme Court.

O lver C. Young ’80, principal court attorney for the 8th District, has coordinated that program since the late 1980s. The internships started as paid positions, he says, but are now unpaid and eight weeks in length; students commit to two seven-hour days per week, though some put in more time. Most are from SUNY Buffalo Law, though there are also interns from other law schools who are home for their summer break.

“I encourage the judges to give them a task that develops their ability to do research and to write, because that’s so critical,” Young says. “It’s something we should all strive to improve on. Students realize it’s critical as well.”

The program fills quickly, Young says, because students who have had an internship talk it up. “Most of them have talked to other students who have been through it,” he says. “And the judges are volunteers as well. They love having students in the course, love being teachers, love the work product that these students provide.”

Completing a prestigious clerkship

For one SUNY Buffalo Law alumnus, landing a prestigious post-graduation clerkship meant beating daunting odds.

Patrick Reinikainen ’12 is now completing his one-year clerkship with Judge Thomas P. Griesa of the federal District Court in the Southern District of New York. Reinikainen is going on to a position with the national white-shoe law firm Davis Polk as well as an appellate clerkship with Judge Julio M. Fuentes ’75 in the Third Circuit.

The Southern District is one of the most selective districts in New York, itself an extremely competitive arena for landing federal judicial clerkships. According to data from the Federal Judicial Center, more than 55,000 applications from students and practicing attorneys were submitted through law schools for the 89 federal clerkship openings throughout New York State in 2011.

“With an overwhelming number of highly qualified attorneys vying for these positions, many federal judges have moved to selection criteria that include graduation from a Top 10 law school plus litigation experience as a practicing attorney,” says Marc Davies, associate director for career services. “Nowhere in the state, nor throughout the country for that matter, is the competition for these jobs as fierce as it is in the Southern District of New York.”

For one SUNY Buffalo Law alumnus, landing a prestigious post-graduation clerkship meant beating daunting odds. Patrick Reinikainen ’12, left, is now completing his one-year clerkship with Judge Thomas P. Griesa.