

DUKE LAW

Preparing for a Post Graduate Judicial Clerkship as a 1L/2L

Just about every lawyer you ask who has served as a judicial clerk will say that clerking for a year or two “was the best job I ever had.” Judicial clerkships are some of the most sought after positions for law school graduates. While law students generally do not apply for clerkships until after the second year of law school, there are many things you can do during your first and second years of school to position yourself to secure a judicial clerkship. This document gets you familiar with what you can be doing now.

Academic Performance & Courses

While there are no specific grade requirements for securing a clerkship, those applicants with higher grades tend to be more successful in obtaining clerkships. Students preparing for a clerkship should take care to keep on top of their school work throughout law school and make classroom performance a priority. They also should strive to do well in classes that directly relate to clerkship related subjects. Judges often look at grades in classes like Federal Courts and Civil Procedure.

Get Involved

Along with doing well in the classroom, it is equally important to get involved in and around the Law School. Clerks spend most of their time researching and writing. For this reason, students interested in becoming a clerk should focus on increasing their skills in these areas. Joining one of Duke’s many law journals is an excellent way of developing these skills; publishing a note or other scholarly article is viewed particularly favorably by judges.

The Moot Court Board also provides additional benefits when applying for clerkships and can be especially beneficial for students wishing to clerk at the trial level. An intimate familiarity with courtroom procedure is something judges look for in their clerks.

Make Connections While you are in Law School

Good grades and being active in the law school will put you in a better position for getting a clerkship, but having someone who can speak on your behalf may help seal the deal. Take advantage of the resources available to you at the law school, in particular Duke faculty. Getting to know your professors inside and outside the classroom is valuable for many reasons. In addition to enhancing the richness of your intellectual experience while in law school, working closely with a faculty member may result in a mentor who can support you throughout your legal career. In addition, faculty members spend significant time supporting Duke clerkship applicants, and the better they know you and your work, the more assistance they can provide through advice and strong recommendations for clerkships. With the large volume of applications many judges receive, judges place great importance on faculty recommendations.

Alongside faculty at Duke, it is important to make good personal connections of all kinds. Get to know the lawyers you work with in the summer, and make the effort to meet your fellow students. Family friends and acquaintances can also prove to be beneficial. Make it a point to attend events with alumni and special guests, including judges and former clerks, and make the effort to network and meet with these people. Each judge is different, but in general they are responsive to recommendations from people they know, whether it is current or past clerks, lawyers they know well, or family friends.

Make the Most of Your Summer Experience

Simply doing well within the halls of the Law School does not always lead to a clerkship after graduation. Judges like to know that you can perform well in “real-world” situations, and that you have more to offer than an excellent transcript. Taking advantage of a good summer opportunity will help you to fill in this last gap.

A great way to prepare for a clerkship is to work as a judicial intern for a judge during your 1L or 2L summer. This is the perfect way to get hands on experience in chambers and to see if it is what you want to be doing after you graduate. It also can be extremely beneficial when applying for clerkships due to having connections with the judge and other members of the court. It is important to note that while some clerks spend a summer interning, it is by no means a requirement for obtaining a clerkship. Also, some judges will not hire as a full-time clerk a student who worked in his or her chambers during a summer, but they can still be a strong reference to colleagues.

Of course, working as a judicial intern is not the only job that can help in obtaining a clerkship. Working for firms, non-profits or the government are equally impressive when applying for clerkships. Another excellent option for prospective applicants is working as a research assistant. Duke faculty are often looking for students who want to develop their research & writing skills. It is also a great way to get to know them better. All of these options provide excellent opportunities to develop the skills that judges look for in clerks.

Final Thought for Now

As you can tell, most judges look for applicants that have done well in all areas of their law school (and life) experiences. These candidates are most likely excellent students in and out of the classroom. They are active in law school journals, clubs and activities, and are proactive in getting to know the faculty and their fellow students. And securing a clerkship is indeed competitive, as some judges will receive up to 1000 applications. The great news is that many Duke Law students and graduates secure clerkships every year, with approximately 50 clerking each term at chambers throughout the country on state and federal trial and appellate courts. Clerking is a great experience and now is the time to start thinking about whether it is the right option for you.