
Launching Your Public Interest Career

A Vanderbilt Student's Guide to Fellowships

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VANDERBILT LAW SCHOOL

Launching Your Public Interest Career: A Vanderbilt Student’s Guide to Fellowships

If you have questions about the content of this guide or about post-graduate public interest fellowships, please contact [Beth Cruz](#) or call 615-875-9860.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

What are public interest fellowships?

Fellowships are time-limited employment opportunities that serve as an important pathway into the public interest legal sector for recent law graduates, including judicial clerks. The universe of public interest fellowships is vast and dynamic. Some fellowships fund recent law graduates to carry out innovative legal advocacy projects, while others are essentially endowed entry-level attorney positions at non-profit organizations. Fellowships offer access to networks and the cachet that comes with having secured a coveted public interest opportunity.

This guide focuses on five categories of established post-graduate public interest fellowships: **project-based**, **organizational**, **firm-sponsored**, **entrepreneurial**, and **clinical**. It also points you to other resources if you are interested in international fellowships or government honors program opportunities.

Many Vanderbilt students have been successful in obtaining public interest fellowships, and with planning, foresight, and effort, you can be too!

Why would I want a public interest fellowship?

Fellowships are an excellent springboard into a public interest career. Fellowships are an opportunity for recent law graduates to follow their passions, create their dream jobs, and put their law degrees to immediate use in service of the greater good. They offer graduates an opportunity to build networks, experience, and strong public interest credentials early on in their legal careers.

What's more, the process of exploring and pursuing public interest fellowship opportunities forces students and recent graduates to assess their own career goals, to identify organizations that would be good fits for them, and to build professional relationships. In other words, if you pursue a public interest fellowship strategically, you are also positioning yourself as effectively as possible to land an entry-level job and embark on a satisfying public interest career.

How can I get a public interest fellowship?

Getting a post-graduate public interest fellowship requires passion, foresight, and strategy. Two things are absolutely necessary: first, commitment to public interest work, and second, skills that will enable you to do that work well. But commitment and skill are not enough. Fellowships also require planning. That planning ideally begins **early** in your law school career. It is critical that you take advantage of the support and resources Vanderbilt Law School offers if you think a fellowship may be a post-graduate path you want to explore.

Fellowships are only one way of securing a post-graduate legal position in the public interest. Furthermore, they are competitive, and no one should assume that he or she will receive one. You therefore also should be exploring other entry points into the career you want, and should take full advantage of the resources offered by the Director for Government and Public Interest Advising in the Office of Career Services.

I am interested in applying for clerkships. How can I coordinate my clerkship and fellowship application processes?

Like fellowships, clerkships are a fantastic way to begin your career, no matter what sort of law you hope to practice. Fortunately, you can aspire to do both. If you are interested in a judicial clerkship, you should be in touch **early** in your law school career with the Clerkships Advisor and ensure that you are on email lists for updates about clerkship application processes. You can apply for fellowships while you are clerking. Indeed, you are likely to be a stronger fellowship applicant because of your clerkship experience. A number of Vanderbilt graduates have been awarded public interest fellowships that began immediately after their clerkships.

Clerkship application deadlines are generally earlier than public interest fellowship application deadlines. In most cases, you will know whether you have secured a clerkship prior to the fall applications for public interest fellowships. This will not always be the case, though. Moreover, successful *project-based* fellowship application planning often requires that you secure a commitment from a host organization in the summer before your third year, when some clerkship applications may still be pending. You could face some difficult timing issues if you find yourself pursuing fellowships and clerkships simultaneously. **It is therefore imperative that you consult closely with both the Clerkships Advisor and the Assistant Dean for Public Interest if you are interested in both opportunities.**

I am interested in pursuing public interest fellowships. What do I need to do?

Here are the basic steps you should take to position yourself competitively for a post-graduate public interest fellowship:

As a 1L...

Start to **brainstorm** your post-graduate plans. What would be your dream job? Are you drawn to a particular issue, target client population, or geographic area?

Imagine yourself in two years explaining to potential funders and employers how and why your background and experiences have led you to that dream job. Then think about how you can use each semester and each summer in law school to develop the experience and contacts you would need to have that conversation.

Review this guide and the sample applications posted in Appendix C to familiarize yourself with the world of post-graduate fellowships.

Meet with Vanderbilt's Assistant Dean for Public Interest to find out about the fellowship opportunities that may be of interest to you. The Assistant Dean can help you brainstorm about how to build the law school experience that may help you get those fellowships.

Attend the 1L Post-Graduate Public Interest Planning Workshop in April.

As a 2L...

Begin to work through the project-based fellowship checklist at the end of this guide.

Apply for summer internships and term externships with an eye towards your post-graduate plans. If you hope to partner with an organization on a project-based fellowship, try to work with

that organization before the application cycle begins. Likewise, if you are interested in pursuing an organization-based fellowship, interning for that organization could make you a particularly competitive applicant.

Meet with Vanderbilt's Assistant Dean for Public Interest (again!) to confirm that you are on track, to make sure you are aware of all the opportunities that could be of interest to you, and to chart out a concrete timeline for pursuing those opportunities. Be sure to consult with the Assistant Dean and the Clerkship Advisor if you aspire to both clerk and obtain a fellowship.

Attend the 2L Post-Graduate Public Interest Planning Workshop in April.

As a 3L (or during your clerkship year)...

Submit fellowship applications! Many project-based and government fellowships have early fall deadlines; others run later in the school year.

Continue to explore other employment opportunities until you get confirmation that you have been selected for a fellowship.

If you do not receive a fellowship, **do not despair!** You may be able to apply again in future funding cycles. And the networking and research you have done while preparing your fellowship application will serve you well in your public interest job search.

CHECKLIST - Before your first meeting with the Assistant Dean for Public Interest, do the following:

Review this guide and familiarize yourself with the various categories of public interest fellowships and their application processes.

1Ls should send the Assistant Dean for Public Interest their resume before the meeting; 2Ls and 3Ls should send resume and transcript.

Ask yourself – and be prepared to discuss –the following questions:

What would be my dream job coming out of law school or a clerkship?

What issues, problems, or communities am I passionate about? How can I use my law degree to address these issues or serve these communities?

What relationships do I have that would help me connect with organizations and advocates in the field I want to work in?

What are the biggest gaps in experience that I would like to fill?

If you are interested in pursuing a project-based fellowship, fill out the questions in the checklist attached as Appendix A as best you can. Send your responses to the Assistant Dean for Public Interest.

Chapter 2: Categories of Fellowships and Examples

While the world of fellowships is large and ever-changing, most post-graduate fellowships fall into one of the following general categories: project-based, organizational, entrepreneurial, clinical, and law firm-sponsored. This chapter describes these fellowship categories and highlights a few examples of each.

A more comprehensive list of fellowship opportunities can be found in Appendix B.

Project-Based Fellowships

Project-based fellowships might be a good fit for you if...

You are interested in proposing a new way to address the unmet legal needs of an underserved population or constituency

You have developed the skills, experience, and relationships that would allow you to develop and implement such a project

You know that you want to work on a specific issue and/or in a specific location in which entry-level attorney openings are limited

Project-based fellowships are funded by foundations that provide support for a recent law graduate to carry out a project in conjunction with an existing non-profit organization ("host organization"). Fellows typically propose to expand the scope of the host organization's existing legal services, often by developing a new advocacy strategy or reaching a new target population. Each foundation that funds project-based fellowships has its own criteria governing the types of projects it will support and the eligibility of applicants and host organizations.

Application deadlines for most project-based fellowships are in the fall preceding the year in which the fellowship will commence. **Usually, this means that the application will be due in fall of your 3L year or the year during which you are clerking.** These applications require significant preparatory work in advance of the application deadline. It is often helpful to work as an intern or extern with your host organization prior to applying for a fellowship. Doing so helps you learn about the type of work the organization does, identify project ideas, and ensure that you and the organization are a good fit. It also demonstrates to funders that you and the organization are committed to one another.

Organizational Fellowships

Organization-based fellowships might be a good fit for you if...

You are interested in working for a national or regional advocacy organization devoted to a particular issue

You have developed experience in and have a demonstrated commitment to that issue

You would prefer to step into an existing position with an organization than to create your own project

Within the universe of public interest fellowships, organization-based fellowships look the most like entry-level staff attorney positions. They are usually administered by the organization itself,

which both provides direct supervision and determines the duration of the fellowship, its salary, and the substance of the fellow's work portfolio.

Generally, the written application processes for these fellowships are relatively straightforward, requiring only the submission of a cover letter or personal statement, resume, references, transcript, and writing sample.

A hybrid form of post-graduate fellowship has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, in which a third-party entity funds a recent law graduate to work with a pre-selected legal services organization. These opportunities do not require the fellow to develop his or her own project or secure a host organization commitment. Unlike "traditional" organization-based fellowships, however, they are funded not by the host organization but by a third-party entity.

Examples of organization-based fellowships

The Polikoff-Gautreaux Fellowship, sponsored by Impact for Equity, for a recent law or public policy graduate to address social justice issues and to enhance the quality of life for all residents of Chicago.

The Zubrow Fellowship in Juvenile Law, sponsored by the Juvenile Law Center, for a recent law graduate to engage in a wide variety of advocacy efforts on behalf of children in the delinquency and dependency systems.

The Sidney M. Wolinsky Fellowship, sponsored by Disability Rights Advocates, for a recent law graduate to advance equal rights for people with all types of disabilities nationwide.

Examples of "hybrid" organizational fellowships

The Immigrant Justice Corps, which funds recent law graduates to work at selected non-profit immigration legal services providers in New York City for two years.

The Gideon's Promise Law School Partnership Program, which places graduates of participating law schools in public defender offices across the southeast with support from the fellows' law schools. Two Vanderbilt Law graduates secured Gideon's Promise fellowships in 2020; future years' availability will depend on funding.

The Equal Justice Works Issue-Specific Fellowship Program, which has in recent years funded dozens of law graduates to work on pre-defined, time-limited legal services projects with participating host organizations. Legal Corps projects have focused on disaster relief, veterans' issues, and removing barriers to employment for low-income persons.

Entrepreneurial Fellowships

Entrepreneurial fellowships might be a good fit for you if...

You are prepared to take the risks and seize the opportunities associated with creating your own organization

You have an innovative idea to change your community in positive ways that can be scaled or replicated elsewhere

You have a track record of leadership or show great promise as a leader and agent of change

Entrepreneurial fellowships provide support for individuals to launch innovative new projects and organizations that will effect social change. Unlike project-based fellowships, which require that an applicant partner with an established organization, entrepreneurial fellowships fund individuals who are in the process of launching new initiatives of their own. And unlike most other fellowships discussed in this guide, entrepreneurial fellowships do not exclusively (or even predominantly) support legal advocacy work. These are opportunities for those of you that have truly bold ideas, and are willing to think big and take risks to make them a reality.

The application process for these fellowships is intense and involved, and requires applicants to explain in great detail why their idea is so exceptional and how they will implement it.

Examples of entrepreneurial fellowships include:

The Echoing Green Global Fellowship, Black Male Achievement Fellowship, and Climate Fellowship programs, each of which supports emerging leaders who have innovative ideas to bring about social change.

The Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation provides start-up funding to exceptional leaders and young organizations that have the potential to have a positive impact on the lives of many people on a national or international scale.

If you are committed to carrying out your idea for a public interest project but cannot find support from fellowship funders, you may want to consider raising money from other sources. You can apply for grants from foundations and corporations, or seek donations from law firms or individuals. You may be eligible for funding from more sources if you can find an existing non-profit organization to affiliate with. Vanderbilt Law School alumni have created their own non-profit organizations through creative fundraising and sheer grit! If this is the route that you wind up taking to make your public interest post-graduate dreams come true, the [Foundation Center website](#) will be a critical resource.

Clinical Teaching Fellowships

Clinical teaching fellowships might be a good fit for you if...

You want to hone your skills in a specific area of the law by practicing in a law school environment

You would enjoy combining public interest practice with teaching law students

You want to pursue a career in clinical legal teaching

There are a number of fellowships that provide opportunities for recent graduates to pursue public interest work by teaching in a law school clinic. These fellowships can be a gateway to a clinical teaching career, but also can be an opportunity for high-level training in specific areas of public interest law. Most of these fellowships are tailored to attorneys with clerkship and/or practice experience, but some are open to 3L applicants. Many offer fellows the opportunity to earn an LL.M. through their work in the fellowship.

Examples of clinical fellowships include:

The Georgetown University Law Center Clinical Teaching Fellowships offer opportunities to work in clinics focusing on topics including indigent criminal defense, juvenile justice, appellate advocacy, immigration and asylum litigation, international human rights, civil rights, domestic violence, federal legislation, and housing policy. Fellows participate in a seminar on clinical pedagogy and earn an LL.M. degree.

The Samuelson Law, Technology & Public Policy Clinic, Clinical Teaching Fellowship at Berkeley Law School, which provides a recent law school graduate the opportunity to develop advocacy and teaching skills in technology law and policy.

The Albert M. Sacks Clinical & Advocacy Fellowship at Harvard Law School, an opportunity for recent graduates and young attorneys to develop their practice-related skills while engaging in research projects related to clinical law teaching.

Law Firm-Sponsored Fellowships

Law firm-sponsored fellowships might be a good fit for you if...

You are interested in exploring both public interest and private sector work

You want to pursue a career in private practice but plan to maintain an active pro bono portfolio

Your background, academic record, and work experience would make you a competitive applicant for an associate position at the sponsoring firm

Law firm-sponsored public interest fellowships take many different forms. Under one model, private law firms fund recent law graduates to work for a designated public interest organization for a specified period of time, usually one or two years. After that time, the fellow works directly for the law firm as a litigation associate. In some law firm fellowships, the fellow works first as an associate at the firm, then as an attorney at the public interest organization. Under another model of law firm-sponsored fellowships, a law firm hires a fellow to work within the firm on pro bono or public interest matters.

Law firm-sponsored fellowships can be a good option for students who want to secure a law firm associate position but who are committed to pro bono and public interest practice.

Examples of law firm-sponsored fellowships include:

The Fried Frank Fellowships with the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF) and the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), sponsored by the law firm of Fried Frank Harris Shriver & Jacobson, give recent law graduates the opportunity to spend two years as a Fried Frank litigator and then two years as a staff attorney with LDF or MALDEF.

The Hunton & Williams Pro Bono Fellowship, sponsored by the law firm of Hunton & Williams, supports fellows in the firm's Richmond and Atlanta offices to work exclusively on pro bono matters for the two-year fellowship period.

The Johnnie Cochran Civil Rights Fellowship, sponsored by the plaintiffs' side civil rights law firm of Neufeld Scheck & Brustin, provides recent law graduates the opportunity to work on the firm's civil rights cases for a two-year fellowship period.

Chapter 3: Developing Your Fellowship Application

Applying for fellowships can be an intensive and involved endeavor. This chapter orients you to various stages of the application process.

You should make sure to consult with the Assistant Dean for Public Interest before you venture into it.

For Project-Based Fellowships Only: The Project Description

Applicants for project-based fellowships must **(a) develop a project** and **(b) secure a commitment from a host organization with which to partner in applying for and implementing their project**. This process sounds daunting - and it does require planning and coordination well in advance of the application deadlines – but many law students each year do it, and so can you!

How do I choose a host organization?

First, recall that project-based fellowship funders often have their own eligibility criteria for host organizations. For example, Skadden and Equal Justice Works require that host organizations have 501(c)(3) status and the capacity to provide legal supervision to fellows (Skadden requires at least two attorneys on staff). Visit fellowship funders' websites and speak with the Assistant Dean for Public Interest to ensure that you understand the funders' criteria for host organizations.

After confirming that an organization meets the criteria of the fellowship funders you are targeting, there are a number of other factors to consider in determining its suitability as a partner:

The organization's commitment to you and the proposed project: Funders will want to know that the host organization is invested in you and your project, and has the capacity to provide you the support and supervision necessary to carry it out.

The relationship between the host organization and the funder: Some funders have long-standing relationships with particular host organizations, and partnering with those organizations may increase your chances of being awarded a fellowship. You may review funders' webpages to get a sense of which host organizations have a strong track record in acquiring these fellowships.

Whether there is an identified EJW sponsor preference for the organization: Each year some Equal Justice Works sponsors indicate that they want to fund a project to be carried out by a particular host organization. If you are able to secure a commitment with one of those host organizations, you are well-positioned to get an Equal Justice Works fellowship.

However, if you want to work with an organization that has never hosted a fellow before, do not be discouraged! The most important consideration, after ensuring that the organization meets the fellowship funder's eligibility criteria and has the commitment and capacity to help you implement your project successfully, is that there be a good fit between you, your organization, and your proposed project.

How should I approach a host organization about partnering to apply for a fellowship?

Some host organizations maintain their own formal application procedures for selecting a student or clerk to partner with in applying for project-based fellowships. These organizations will usually post their solicitations for fellowship applicants on their own websites and on [PSJD](#). Some are forwarded to Vanderbilt's Office of Career Services, which posts them in Symplicity. Often, the deadlines for these applications are **in the summer before the fall fellowship applications are due**. Usually, this will mean in the summer between your 2L and 3L years, or the summer before you start a clerkship. If you are selected by the host organization, this does not mean you are guaranteed a fellowship. But it does mean that the organization wants a fellow, wants you to be that fellow, and will throw its resources behind the application.

Most fellowship applicants, however, secure a commitment from a host organization by approaching them informally. In an ideal world, you will have worked with an organization or have some connection to it prior to initiating that conversation. Often, though, that isn't feasible. Many successful fellowship applicants secure host organizations through contacts from law school advisors or previous employers—or by simply reaching out to those organizations directly. If you don't have a clear sense of your target host organization, talk with the Assistant Dean for Public Interest, who can help you both identify potential partners and strategize about contacting those organizations.

You should have a general sense of the kind of project you would be interested in pursuing prior to approaching a potential host organization. For example, you should know that you'd like to work with disabled youth in state care, or address predatory lending issues in low-income communities, or tackle legal barriers that formerly incarcerated persons face re-entering society.

However, do not feel as though you need to have a fully-developed proposal before you initiate these conversations. Host organizations often want to play an active role in designing fellowship projects. This is good for everyone, because the best project is one that feeds your passion and fits within the overall goals of the organization. To design such a project, you need their input.

Further, it is a good idea to approach potential host organizations well before the fall project fellowship application deadlines. Waiting to talk to them until you've fully developed your project idea could put you at a disadvantage, since they may commit to sponsor other applicants before you've had a chance to introduce yourself.

How should I come up with a project idea?

First, you should familiarize yourself with fellowship funders' project eligibility criteria. Visit funders' webpages and speak with the Assistant Dean for Public Interest to ensure that you understand what kind of work may be undertaken through the various project fellowship programs.

As a general matter, public interest fellowship funders will only support projects that serve or promote the interests of populations whose interests are not adequately represented in the legal system.

Beyond this general rule, each funder has its own criteria for the kinds of public interest work it will support. For example, the Soros Justice Fellowships Program only funds projects intended to reform the criminal justice system. The Skadden Foundation supports projects that provide direct civil legal services to poor and marginalized populations, and will not fund fellows who

propose to engage in direct criminal representation. The Borchard Foundation provides support for fellows to pursue a project on law and aging.

"The key is choosing a project that (1) you are passionate about in a way that comes across clearly in your application and during your interview and (2) fulfills a real need for your host organization."

Lauren Lowe '09, Skadden Fellow 2010

There is no uniform process or timeline for the development of a project proposal or securing of a host organization—except, of course, to the extent that both elements must be in place sufficiently in advance of the due date to enable you to write a strong application.

Some students come up with project ideas without much involvement from the host organization, but for most applicants, the process of developing a project and engaging a host organization are intertwined.

Some host organizations come up with their own project ideas and look for applicants to partner with, while other host organizations play a far more limited role in the project development process.

At a minimum, a host organization must buy in to the project, be able to articulate how the project relates to its existing work and mission, and commit its resources to the fellow and project as required by the rules of the fellowship program.

Remember that you will need to solidify your relationship with a host organization no later than the end of the summer between your 2L and 3L years, or the summer before you clerk, if the fellowship for which you are applying has a fall application deadline.

Throughout the process of developing a project, you should be speaking with other advocates working with the communities you plan to serve. The feedback and input from advocates in the field will help you strengthen your proposal, and fellowship funders will be happy to hear that you have been doing your homework.

[For All Fellowships: The Written Application Package](#)

Just as there are many different kinds of post-graduate public interest fellowships, the application processes for these various opportunities vary widely. For example, some (like Skadden) have very strict word limits. All of them, however, require at a minimum:

- Some sort of personal statement or letter of interest
- A resume
- Letters of recommendation or references

You should use all elements of the written application package to introduce yourself and set forth your commitment to and passion for the opportunity you are seeking. Think of it as an opportunity to explain what makes you you and why you want this particular fellowship.

Examples of fellowship applications submitted by past Vanderbilt students are available in Appendix C: Fellowship Application Library.

As with any job application, you should take time to carefully craft the written pieces of your fellowship application. Make sure that you **send all your drafts—including your resume—to the Assistant Dean for Public Interest for review well in advance** of the application deadlines. They will give detailed feedback on your drafts and ensure that your final written product is as strong as possible.

Personal Statement

Whether it is in the form of a personal essay or simply a cover letter, all fellowship applications require that you explain your background and experiences in some narrative form. Again, always read carefully the specific instructions of the fellowship for which you are applying.

You should use this opportunity to get very personal, to show the reader who you are and why you want to do the work you want to do. All fellowship funders are looking for commitment to and enthusiasm for the work you propose to undertake. Your personal narrative should be brimming with passion while also providing a clear explanation as to how you developed that passion.

Make sure that your personal statement also reflects your intention to use the law to address the issues you are passionate about. While you may have always known that you wanted to help poor or marginalized individuals, public interest legal fellowship funders will be paying you to use a very specific tool – your law degree – in service of those communities. There is an important distinction between volunteerism and public interest legal advocacy, and you should make clear that you are not conflating the two. Even if you are applying for a fellowship that does not require direct legal practice—such as an entrepreneurial opportunity focused on organizing work—you should be able to articulate why your law degree will help you achieve your goals. The best personal statements are those that reflect a deep personal passion for social justice work and an excitement about the prospect of using a law degree to contribute to that work.

Sample personal statement excerpts

The personal statement is, of course, highly individualized—there is no formula. These short excerpts provide a window into the sorts of things that successful fellowship applicants have said. Think about what you can say that will capture your motivations and goals as well as they captured theirs.

Describing how a family commitment to community work cemented an interest in serving poor children:

"Carl Buechner wrote that one's vocation lies at the intersection of one's deep gladness and one of the world's deep needs. This project lies at the intersection of my deep gladness and one of the world's deep needs."

"On my second day interning at the Davidson County Public Defender's office, so many defendants were called into the courtroom at once, the bailiff ran out of handcuffs. The last defendant in the line of ten was told to pretend he was cuffed; obligingly, he held his wrists

together as if invisibly bound. In a few minutes, each defendant pleaded guilty to a felony.... A felony conviction in Tennessee functions like the tenth defendant's invisible handcuffs: despite the absence of physical restraint, it limits employment opportunities, stymies reintegration into society, and prevents participation in one of the most fundamental activities in a democracy... What I saw in that Tennessee court that day was ten people losing part of their personhood. If they are fortunate, they may find employment and housing; but, without the right to vote, they will never find their voice as citizens. It is time that these invisible chains of felony disenfranchisement be removed."

"I come from a background of environmental sustainability and land use planning, and I believe that the future of sustainability work is realizing the potential of effective planning to confront health and poverty issues. Similarly, I believe that the future of anti-poverty work will embrace the value of sustainable land use and planning in creating healthy, stable urban communities that will grow with a city rather than get left behind."

"By litigating against non-compliant employers and conducting community education and advocacy to ensure that government agencies enforce health and safety protections for the rapidly-growing Spanish-speaking workforce in the rural south, I will help contribute to a climate of accountability and respect for the rule of law in workplaces and government agencies. In so doing, I will participate in making the central promise of our country and its legal system – commitments to equal opportunity and equal protection for all – meaningful in communities throughout my home state and region."

Describing a passion for indigent criminal defense work:

"To embrace someone at a moment of his or her greatest weakness and, against all odds, help him survive that moment with humanity, dignity, and respect is a moment that makes all other moments worthwhile. To be able to lock eyes with a so-called 'monster' and feel a genuinely angry, indignant, and empathetic energy is an experience that will keep me coming back for a very long time."

Resume

Your resume, too, should reflect your commitment to and passion for public interest work. Make sure to include all your public interest experience on it. Do not worry about keeping your resume to one page or less for the purpose of public interest fellowship applications. College public interest work (for example, interning for a legal aid organization or public policy institute, international human rights work, and the like) should be included, and you may even want to include significant high school public interest work if you have it. You should include volunteer experience (for example, tutoring children, working with Habitat for Humanity, or running food drives) on your resume as well, though it is less important. Make sure that you will be able to distinguish in an interview between volunteer or charity efforts and legal advocacy in the public interest.

If your resume is not long on public interest experience, you should take extra care in your personal narrative to explain your career trajectory and to detail your commitment to public interest work.

References and Recommendations

Many fellowship applications require that applicants submit letters of recommendation. Others require a list of references. In general, you should include as recommenders (a) someone who has supervised you in a work or practice setting *and* (b) a law professor who is familiar with your academic work. Again, check the specific requirements. Some funders, such as Skadden, expressly require the submission of recommendations from an employer and law professor.

As with other elements of the written application package, the recommendation letters should be highly personal and should emphasize your commitment to public interest work.

Your recommenders should be able to discuss who you are in detail and to speak to your passion for public interest work. Ideally, these letters should emphasize characteristics that will make you successful as a public interest attorney – for example, your intellect; the rapport you have with clients; your legal research and writing skills; and your maturity and self-direction. Have a personal conversation with your recommenders about these aspects of the letter. Ask them what they want to know about you to be able to write that letter, and how they'd like to get that information (e.g., through talking together or in writing).

Send all recommenders and references a copy of your resume and a description of the fellowship opportunity you are seeking. Make sure you explain to your recommenders, in writing or in person, why the fellowship you are pursuing is of interest to you.

If you are applying for a project-based fellowship, send an outline of your project proposal.

For each recommender, communicate clearly when the letters are due, to whom they should be addressed, and how they need to be submitted (e.g., electronically, in a sealed envelope to you, or mailed directly).

Above all, make sure you give your recommenders, all of whom are busy, adequate time to write a good letter. Two weeks is an absolute minimum, but the more, the better.

Project-Based and Entrepreneurial Fellowships: Project Description

In addition to the above materials, these sorts of fellowships generally also will require:

- A project description
- A letter of support from any host organization

The description of the project you will undertake, whether within an existing host organization (for *project-based* fellowships) or in a new organization of your making (for *entrepreneurial* fellowships), is the heart of those applications. In order to obtain an interview and the opportunity to sell your idea in person, this section of your application must be strong and coherent. It should set forth clearly the needs you propose to address and how you propose to address them. Your project goals should be meaningful but not unrealistic, and you should explain clearly how you will meet them. **Most funders require that you lay out a specific timeline in your project description.**

If you are partnering with a host organization, coordinate closely with that organization in both your project description and their letter. You need to show that you are on the same page, and even small differences in how you describe the mission and methods can cause confusion. The organization needs to convey clearly that (a) it will be a competent and caring home for this project and (b) the legal need your project will address is a pressing one they cannot otherwise take on, but can with you on board. They will also need to review your draft application to make

sure you have accurately captured what they hope to accomplish with your fellowship. The Assistant Dean for Public Interest will work with you and your host organization on your written materials in order to maximize your joint effectiveness.

"Finding the right project involves balancing your interests with the needs of the organization and the community you hope to serve. Think about not just what substantive areas of the law you want to practice, but also what you want your day-to-day job to look like. Do you want to do spend most of your time meeting with clients and handling individual cases? Do you want to spend most of your time researching and writing? Do you want to do other forms of advocacy, such as training other lawyers or lobbying? But also remember to think about the structure and mission of your organization -- even if you have all sorts of brilliant ideas for a project, they may not succeed if they don't mesh with current work of your organization. I found that it was best to come to the organization with some ideas, but to make sure to listen to the organization's vision of what your project might look like."

Karen Lindell '12, Skadden Fellow 2014

Sample project descriptions

One mark of a solid project is the ability to convey its fundamental mission and methods in a sentence or two. Here are some examples of projects that have been funded in the past. Can you boil down what you'd like to do in a concise way like this? That's your ultimate goal.

Legal advocacy, representation, and education for service-members and veterans to prevent harm from predatory financial services and practices, with a focus on preventing mortgage foreclosure. (2014 Equal Justice Works project)

Promote access to safe housing in underserved neighborhoods along the Texas Gulf Coast by addressing health and safety hazards from nearby industries through litigation, administrative advocacy, and community education. (2014 Equal Justice Works project)

Advocacy to meet the transition and treatment needs of dependent and delinquent youth ages 14-21 with disabilities, through representation, impact litigation and training so that they can become successful adults. (2014 Skadden project)

Document and promote policy reforms and litigation strategies that address the specific ways in which discriminatory policing impacts women of color. (2014 Soros Justice project)

Sample applications are available

The Assistant Dean for Public Interest has a database of Vanderbilt students' applications from previous years, which you should consult once you reach the drafting stage. Personal statements and project/organization descriptions are particularly hard to write, so take advantage of these high-quality examples.

[All Fellowships: Interviews and Selection Process](#)

Interviews

Public interest fellowship application processes are very competitive, and only the strongest candidates will be selected for interviews. For many fellowships the interview is crucial. If you

receive a fellowship interview, you must prepare, prepare, and prepare some more!
The Assistant Dean for Public Interest will help you engage in multiple mock interviews. It is also important to speak to as many former fellows and past applicants who have gone to interviews as possible.

You must display passion, enthusiasm, excitement, and energy in your interview. Funders want to see fellows who are truly and unapologetically passionate about the communities they plan to serve. You must also be prepared to talk details. Funders want to select people whom they believe can translate their passion into concrete advocacy.

Some applicants prepare a handout about their projects to give to their interviewers. If you choose to do so, make sure that you keep it simple and short. The handout should not be text-heavy. It is most appropriate if your ideas revolve around information that can best be conveyed visually, such as a map of the service area you intend to cover or a flow chart demonstrating how various community partners will refer cases to you.

"Share your passions and get excited. All public interest lawyers chose to do the work they do. [Interviewers] want to make sure you know you are making that choice, and that you are confident and excited about your choice. Don't be nervous, be ecstatic! Your interview is an opportunity to live the legal career of your dreams. That is a reason to celebrate--so show it!"

Wyatt Sassman '12,

**Southern Environmental Law Center Associate Attorney
(two-year organizational fellowship)**

You should be prepared to answer questions about any recent media coverage of issues related to your proposed project.

Some of the questions you can anticipate in fellowship interviews are:

General questions

Why are you interested in public interest work?

Why are you passionate about [the particular issue on which you'd be working]?

How have your experiences in law school prepared you for this fellowship?

Have you talked to XX (current or former fellow working on your issue or in your proposed geographic area)?

Where do you see yourself in ten years?

Did you apply to any other fellowships? Clerkships? What other job prospects are you pursuing?

What questions do you have for us? What questions were you prepared to answer that we did not ask you?

Project-based fellowship questions

How did you come up with your project idea?

Why is this project particularly needed?

What will be your client population? How will you relate to them? What past experiences do you have working with this population?

How will you get cases?

What will be the impact of your project? How will you measure the success of your project?

Why did you choose to work with your host organization? Have you worked with it before?

Who will supervise you?

What challenges do you believe you will encounter in implementing your project, and how will you address them?

Organization-based fellowship questions

What most interests you about our organization?

Why are you drawn to [the particular issue on which you would work]?

What prior experience do you have working with an organization like ours?

Why do you believe you would be a good fit with our office?

Law-firm based fellowship questions

What do you see as the ideal balance between private and public interest legal work?

What are your aspirations for your future practice?

Why are you interested in our firm in particular?

Entrepreneurial fellowship questions

Have you ever started a program or organization from scratch? Tell us about it.

Why can't the need you've identified be addressed through existing resources?

What do you think will be the biggest challenges you will encounter, and how do you anticipate meeting them?

What allies do you plan on partnering with in getting your idea off the ground?

What would it take to sustain your project or organization once our funding terminates?

Clinical fellowship questions

Why are you interested in working with law students?

What in your background prepares you for the teaching aspect of this position?

Can you tell us about your own clinical experience as a law student?

Do you hope to teach in a law school clinic some day?

After the interview, you should follow up with a professional and tasteful thank you note to your interviewers.

Chapter 4: Resources

The most important resources for you as you research post-graduate public interest fellowship ideas are people: Vanderbilt's Public Interest Office and Career Services staff; professors who know you well; employers in the fields you are interested in; students and alums who have worked in those fields; and other contacts you have developed through your work experiences. Throughout your networking process, you should work closely with the Assistant Dean for Public Interest. They will advise you on when and how to reach out to fellowship funders themselves.

Finally, you should spend significant time consulting with the many excellent written resources on public interest employment and post-graduate fellowships, particularly the following:

[Public Service Jobs Directory \(PSJD\)](#)

The most important online resource for fellowship planning is also the online centerpiece of all public interest employment searches: PSJD. PSJD has a membership of more than 200 law schools and over 13,000 law-related public interest organizations. Because Vanderbilt is a PSJD member, Vanderbilt students and alums can use the site to search for summer and permanent jobs as well as fellowship opportunities. You must create a personal login to use PSJD.

To search PSJD for (a) fellowship opportunities and (b) host organizations that are looking to sponsor project-based fellowship applicants, take the following steps:

Click on "Search Jobs" then click on "Refine Search" to expand search options

In the "Keywords" field type in "fellowship" or "fellow" then click "Search", or

Click on "Job Qualities" then "Job Types" to pull up various kinds of job categories, including three that are fellowship-related. Click on the fellowship categories that interest you; a check mark will show up next to the categories you choose. Click "Search" to filter results.

You can also narrow your search by practice area and location.

PSJD's Resource Center also includes several helpful documents to guide you through the fellowship search and application process:

[Background Info & Resources on Postgraduate Public Interest Fellowships](#)

[Postgraduate Public Interest Fellowships: Application Deadline List](#)

[Postgraduate Fellowship Comparison Chart](#)

[Fellowship \(Project-based\) Applications: Tips from Those Who Know](#)

[Symlicity](#)

Vanderbilt's Office of Career Services posts fellowship opportunities and host organization solicitations on Symlicity.

[Yale Law School, Career Development Office](#)

Yale Law School maintains a helpful overview of public interest fellowships that is available to the public.

Appendix A: Checklist for Developing a Project-Based Fellowship Application

This checklist is a guide to the questions you should ask yourself, and the steps you should take, as you prepare to pursue a project-based fellowship. You should familiarize yourself with this checklist as a 1L, and begin to develop answers to the questions in it during your 2L year. **Do not feel, however, that you must have answers to these questions prior to meeting with the Assistant Dean for Public Interest. You and the Assistant Dean can work through them together.**

(Special thanks to 2007 Skadden Fellow, Jennifer Hill, for her assistance in developing this list.)

Clients, Communities, Services, and Impact

In what geographic area do you want to work?

There are generally more opportunities and resources in large coastal cities like New York, Washington D.C., or San Francisco. However, many of these opportunities are extremely competitive. In general, the more geographically flexible you are, the more opportunities you will have.

Do you have a connection to this geographic area – personal or work history?

If you do not have a preference, please identify geographic areas in which you have worked or with which you have a personal connection.

With what client group(s) do you most want to work?

Have you worked with this group in the past? Please describe when, where, and around what sorts of issues.

Do you have the necessary language skills to communicate with those clients? If not, you should make a plan to develop those skills or pick a different client group.

What sorts of problems do you think you'd like to work to address, or what areas of law are of interest to you?

Why do you believe these problems must be addressed? How do they affect communities you want to work with?

Have you worked in this issue area before? In what capacity?

How many individuals in the community of interest to you are experiencing this sort of problem?

What are the legal and advocacy strategies you want to deploy to address these problems?

Please identify the local, state, federal, or international law(s) under which you will provide services.

Please identify the administrative body, court, or other forum(s) in which you will represent clients.

What will be the impact of the advocacy strategies you use or the services you will provide?

For your clients?

For the client population as a whole?

For the community?

Host Organizations

Which are the leading organizations doing work in the field that interests you or the geographic area you want to work in?

If you do not know, how will you find out?

Have you worked with any of these organizations/individuals?

Do any of these organizations have a current Skadden Fellow? EJW Fellow? Have they hosted these or any other sort of fellow in the past?

To determine whether a potential host organization has the capacity to sponsor and supervise you, ask the following:

Are there attorneys at the host organization who practice the kind of law you plan to practice?

Does the organization already work with the client population in which you are interested? If so, what services are currently provided?

If you plan on litigating in federal court, are there attorneys who do federal court litigation, even if they litigate different sorts of claims?

Identify which organizations are Legal Services Corporation (LSC)-funded and which are not. Note that LSC programs, which include most organizations with the words "Legal Aid" in their name, operate under a number of restrictions on whom they can serve and what kind of projects they can undertake. They can be wonderful host organizations, but within distinct parameters. Both the Assistant Dean for Public Interest and the potential host organization can help you determine whether your idea falls within those parameters.

Try to determine what the process is for securing a sponsorship commitment from these host organizations:

Have any of these potential organizations posted a notice (either on their websites or on PSJD) seeking fellowship candidates for a particular sort of project?

If the organization has posted a notice, what is the project they describe?

Does the organization advertise for candidates in the summer, or does the organization respond to candidate inquiries?

Who is the decision-maker in the organization that makes the ultimate call as to whether to sponsor a given candidate?

Developing your application

Look on funders' websites at descriptions to familiarize yourself with projects they have funded in the past.

Carry out informational interviews with former fellows and leaders in the field in which you are interested. Take notes, incorporate their thoughts into your project proposal, and send thank you emails.

Review the application processes and timelines for the fellowships of interest. Make sure that you, your project, and your host organization will meet their criteria, and that you are prepared to provide all information requested in the application.

Identify the professors and/or supervisors who will write letters of recommendation.

Identify who at your host organization will be preparing the fellowship sponsor's letter. Make a plan for exchanging drafts of your application and their sponsor letter.

If your host organization does not have past experience with successful fellowship applications, you will need to work closely with the Assistant Dean for Public Interest to provide support and feedback to the host organization. You also will need to budget extra time for completing the application.

In conjunction with the Assistant Dean for Public Interest, create a calendar for drafting, seeking feedback, rewriting/editing, and proofreading your application materials.

Appendix B: Selected Post-Graduate Public Interest Fellowship Opportunities

Below is a list of post-graduate public interest fellowship opportunities, organized by category. **This is not an exhaustive list**, and while some of these are very established opportunities, others may fluctuate in their availability and/or application timelines from year to year.

We have included general application deadlines for project-based applications based on previous years. You should visit the fellowship's webpage to confirm deadline dates and other application process details.

(Links last visited July 2022)

Project-based fellowships

[American Bar Association Section of Taxation–Public Service Fellowship Program](#) - Application deadline: November (in previous years)

[Berkeley Law Foundation Post-Graduate Fellowship](#) - Application deadline: January (in previous years)

[Borchard Foundation on Law and Aging](#) - Application deadline: April 1 (each year)

[Equal Justice Works](#) - Application deadline: September (in previous years)

[Independence Foundation](#) - Application deadline: September (in previous years)

[Justice Catalyst](#) - Application deadline: December 1 (in previous years)

[Skadden](#) - Application deadline: September (in previous years)

[Soros Advocacy Fellowship](#) - Application deadline: October (in previous years)

[Stoneleigh Foundation, Emerging Leaders Fellowship](#) - Application deadline: January (in previous years)

[Pride Law Fund, Tom Steel Post-Graduate Fellowship](#) - Application deadline: January (in previous years)

[Vermont Poverty Law Fellowship, Vermont Legal Aid](#) - Application deadline: November (in previous years)

Organization-based fellowships

[American Civil Liberties Union Fellowships](#)

[Animal Legal Defense Fund Litigation Fellowship](#)

[Business and Professional People for the Public Interest Polikoff-Gautreaux Fellowship](#)

[Disability Rights Advocates Sid Wolinsky Fellowship](#)

[Equal Justice Initiative Fellowship](#)

[Fair Vote Democracy Fellowship Program](#)

[Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, Lindsay Fellowship](#)

[Murnaghan Fellowship, Public Justice Center](#)

[NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund Fellowship](#)

[North Carolina Legal Aid Fellowships Program](#)

[Zubrow Fellowship in Juvenile Law, Juvenile Law Center](#)

Hybrid Organizational fellowships

These fellowships are non-project-based opportunities funded by an entity other than the organization for which the fellow will be working.

[Gideon's Promise Law School Partnership Program](#)

[Immigrant Justice Corps](#)

Entrepreneurial fellowships

[Ashoka Fellowships](#)

[Draper Richards Kaplan](#)

[Echoing Green's Social Entrepreneurship Fellowship and Leadership Development Programs](#)

[Skoll Foundation](#)

Clinical Teaching fellowships

[Georgetown Law Clinical Fellowships](#)

[UCLA School of Law, Binder Clinical Teaching Fellowship](#)

[University of Baltimore School of Law Civil Advocacy Clinic](#)

Firm-sponsored fellowships

Law firm places fellow with a public interest organization

[Fried Frank NAACP Legal Defense Fund and Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund Fellowships](#)

Law firm hires fellow to work on public interest or pro bono matters

[Altshuler, Berzon, Nussbaum, Rubin & Demain Environmental Fellowship](#)

[Bernabai & Kabat Civil Rights Fellowship](#)

[Immigrant Law Group PC ILG Post-Graduate Innovator Fellowship](#)

[John Gibbons Fellowship in Public Interest and Constitutional Law](#)

[Murphy Anderson PLLC Murphy Public Interest Fellowship](#)

[Neufeld Scheck & Brustin, Cochran Civil Rights Fellowship](#)

[Relman, Dane & Colfax Relman Civil Rights Fellowship](#)

[Shute, Mihaly & Weinberger Fellowship](#)

Appendix C: Fellowship Application Library

Vanderbilt Law students can view the Fellowship Application Library [here](#).