

A Pre-Law Student Guide to Experiential Learning: Clinics, Externships, Practicums and More

As legal employers are looking for more practice-ready students, law schools are increasingly offering more experiential learning opportunities, so that students can learn from practical experiences. As you think about which law school is the best fit for you, this guide will help you ask the right questions to determine the breadth and depth of experiential learning opportunities at each school you are considering.

Law schools offer an array of experiential opportunities, including law clinics, externships, simulation courses, and practicums, among others, that provide students with the ability to learn from hands-on experience:

*A **law clinic** is a course in which a significant part of the learning involves students assuming the role of a lawyer representing actual clients, or performing other lawyering roles, under the supervision of an attorney who is employed by the law school. Law clinics may operate out of the law school or in the community, with or without community partners.*

*An **externship** is a course in which a significant part of the learning relies on students either representing clients or performing other lawyering roles under the supervision of practicing lawyers or other qualified legal professionals who are not employed by the law school, in practices outside the law school.*

***Simulation** courses refer to a course that provides students with an experience reasonably similar to the experience of a lawyer but does not involve an actual client.*

*A **practicum** is a course focused on a discrete area of law that integrates a requirement that students engage in practical fieldwork or complex simulations on the topic of study. For other definitions, please refer to the AALS Policy Committee's **Glossary for Experiential Education**, available online at*

https://memberaccess.aals.org/eweb/dynamicpage.aspx?webcode=ChpDetail&chp_cst_key=2546c8e7-1cda-46eb-b9f3-174fc509169b.¹

When you are trying to decide which law school is the right fit, the types of opportunities available should factor into your decision. This guide was produced to help you know the relevant questions to ask at each school in order to gain an understanding of what the various experiential opportunities will look like.

I. HOW EXPERIENTIAL IS THE LAW SCHOOL?

¹ *It is important to note, however, that, while commonly used by many law schools, these terms are not used by all law schools in the same manner. For example, what may be considered a "practicum" at one school may be considered a "simulation" at another. In addition, while this Consumer Guide is designed to help you navigate the experiential offerings at the various law schools in which you are interested, this Consumer Guide does not make any assertions about whether any of the experiential experiences described herein meet the requirements for experiential education established by the American Bar Association ("ABA"). The ABA establishes academic standards for law schools, including standards governing experiential education.*

- A. What is the range of experiential options at the law school?
 - 1. Clinics? Externships? Semesters in practice or co-ops? Practicums? Simulated courses?
 - 2. Does the law school offer multiple types of experiences or only in-house experiences, only off-campus opportunities or only simulated experiences?
- B. What percentage of students at the law school participate in clinics, externships, or both?
- C. Is there a high demand for experiential opportunities? If so, what percentage of seats in law clinics/externships are filled each year?
- D. Does the law school guarantee an externship or clinical experience to all law students who are interested in one?
- E. The ABA requires all law students to complete 6 credits of experiential education prior to graduation. Does this law school have an additional experiential requirement? Or, is there a cap on the number of experiential credits a student can take? If so, what is it and how many non-clinical simulation courses are available to satisfy the experiential course requirement?
- F. Are clinics mandatory? If so, how are slots allocated?
- G. Is there a mandatory pro bono requirement?
 - 1. If so, how many hours are required and in what type of opportunities?
 - 2. Do clinical or externship credits count towards the pro bono requirement?

II. WHAT WILL MY EXPERIENCE BE LIKE?

- A. What should I expect from my experiential opportunity?
 - 1. What types of cases and projects will I work on?
 - a. What is the subject-matter of clinics offered?
 - b. What is the range of subject-matter and legal setting opportunities for externships?
 - 2. What are the skills and substantive law that I will learn?
 - a. What is the application and selection process like? Is there an interview?
 - b. How likely is it that I'll get in my first choice clinic or externship placement? Are there a limited number of slots?
 - c. For externships, do I find my own placement?
 - 3. Can I take more than one clinic or externship during my law school career? How often do students take a second clinic or externship?
 - 4. Can I take a clinic and externship in the same semester?
 - 5. If I'm a part-time or evening student, what options are available to me?
- B. How is the experience structured?
 - 1. Where will I have my work experiences? (on-site /offsite office, courts, jails, etc.)
 - 2. What will my workspace be like?
 - 3. Will I have the opportunity to work with community or partner agencies?
 - 4. How many credit hours will I get for the clinic or externship? Am I graded for some or all of my credits?

5. Is there a seminar? If so, who teaches my seminar?
 6. Who is giving me feedback on my work?
 7. What is the average student to faculty ratio?
 8. How many hours will I be expected to work? Is there a weekly hourly requirement? Does the seminar count as a part of that requirement?
- C. What restrictions are there on my experience?
1. When am I allowed to take a clinic or externship (1L, 2L, 3L)?
 2. Are there any pre- or co-requisites?
 3. Are the clinics or externships offered for a semester, a full-year or are both types available?
 4. Can I take a clinic or an externship while I'm enrolled in other experiential courses?
 5. For clinics:
 - a. Is there a cap on the total number of credits that I can earn by taking clinics? If so, what is it?
 - b. Is there a cap on the number of credits that a student can earn in clinical courses in any given semester? If so, what is it?
 6. For externships:
 - a. May I do a full "semester in practice"? If so, are there any restrictions on host organizations?
 - b. May I do an externship at any point during the year including summer? In a remote location? Internationally?

III. WHAT OTHER EXPERIENTIAL COURSES ARE OFFERED?

- A. What kinds of other experiential courses are offered (practicums, simulated, etc.)?
- B. What topic-areas do they cover?
- C. What kind of skills training is available?
- D. How many credit hours will I receive?
- E. Will they be graded?
- F. Who teaches these courses?
- G. What is the average faculty/student ratio?
- H. How do students enroll?
- I. Are cases/projects real or simulated?

This guide was created by the Policy Committee of the AALS's Section of Clinical Legal Education.