

From the Director of Public Service Initiatives: Bridge-to-Practice Fellowships Update — Survey Results

by *Christina H. Jackson*

Recently the NALP staff worked with the Public Service Section to create and implement the Bridge-to-Practice Fellowship Programs Update 2015. This survey targeted all NALP member law schools and was designed to provide an update on the evolution of bridge-to-practice programs since NALP collected information about these programs for the Classes of 2011 and 2012. The information provided was based on programs as they were implemented for the Class of 2014.

For purposes of the survey, bridge-to-practice programs provide recent law school graduates with an opportunity to develop and enhance their practical legal skills as they transition into the practice of law, generally by providing funding of some sort for a period of post-graduate work in one of several kinds of legal workplaces. Typically, third-year students or recent graduates apply for funding for a defined term of service on a project with an approved employer. Fellowships are typically subject to preapproval, may or may not require proof of hours or projects completed, and may be paid on an hourly, lump sum, salary, or other basis. Bridge-to-practice programs are generally funded in whole or in part by a law school, university, or related organization for work performed for a third party (e.g., public interest organization, government agency, member of the judiciary, or private employer).

A total of 92 schools responded to the survey, representing all U.S. NALP regions, a range of school sizes, and both public and private law schools. Of these, 45 schools — or 49% — reported having a program. In comparison, 84 schools responded to

the previous survey about the Class of 2011, with 46 schools (or 55%) having bridge-to-practice programs. Of the schools reporting a bridge-to-practice program in 2014, 19% started the program in 2007 or earlier and 81% began their programs in 2008 or later.

The biggest change from the 2012 survey is in the reported duration of the fellowships themselves. The number of bridge-to-practice programs that provide fellowships that are one year in length has increased to 40%, compared to only 19% in the 2012 survey. This is consistent with other NALP research that found that the percentage of law school-funded jobs that are reported as long-term and full-time has also increased over the same period.

Key Findings

- Survey results show bridge-to-practice programs are more common among private schools and in large metropolitan areas. For instance, more than half the schools that reported programs are private (65%) and 71% characterized themselves as being in metropolitan areas of a million or more in population. Programs were fairly evenly distributed among schools of all sizes, with schools reporting a JD enrollment of 550-749 most commonly reporting bridge programs (11), followed by those with a JD enrollment of less than 550 at 9. Schools with bridge-to-practice programs reporting JD enrollments of 750-1,000 and more than 1,000 were evenly split at 6 each.

- More than half (65%) of schools reported their programs were competitive. The most cited criteria for awarding fellowships were an application with a personal essay or statement of interest and an employer commitment. Other less prevalent criteria include subject matter expertise (experience or required law school courses), dedication to public interest work, the likelihood of a permanent position (or plan for making the position permanent at this or a similar employer), or that the position be in the state in which the bar exam was taken.
- Most of the programs are run by the career services offices (80%). Where the responsibility for overseeing the program rested with another office, the public service office was most often noted.
- More than half of the schools (62%) reported that fellowship opportunities were identified by both students/graduates and staff.
- In a vast majority of the programs (90%), the graduate does not have to have passed a bar exam to be eligible for the fellowship.
- Half of the fellowships were obtained after graduation, with 18% obtained before graduation. Thirty-two percent of schools reported a mix of both
- A majority of the schools had a rolling start date for fellowships; however, most were clustered in the late August/early September timeframe after graduation. Twenty-two percent of programs began on a date certain. Commentary indicates most programs with a specific date chose September 1, with a few starting after the July bar exam. Some schools indicated a start month, generally September or October, and a small number allowed a start date in December through March in the year following graduation.
- Another shift from the previous survey is in full-time versus part-time work. Just over half of the schools reported their fellows worked full-time; 35% said fellows work part-time; and 14% are a split of full-time and part-time. We saw the exact opposite in 2012 — at that time just over half the schools reported their fellows worked part-time. This again mirrors the trend measured in NALP’s ERSS data from recent law school graduates that show a net shift in the characterization of law school-funded jobs from part-time to full-time over the same period.

Table 1. Duration of Fellowships

3 months or less	32.6%
4-6 months	39.5%
7-9 months	7.0%
10-11 months	7.0%
1 year	39.5%
More than 1 year	4.7%
Not preset	7.0%

* Note: Percentages add to more than 100 because more than one option could be chosen.

- With the shift in the number of fellowships from part-time to full-time comes a decrease in the number of fellowships with built-in job search time. Commentary indicates reserving some of the fellowship hours for job search is less prevalent. However, there now seems to be more required contact with the career services offices, such as regular meetings and focused career development plans, as part of the fellowships.

Table 2. Required Communication with the Career Services Office During a Fellowship

Regular meetings with a counselor (in-person or via telephone)	60.6%
Develop a career development/job search plan	42.4%
Attend meetings either at school (non CSO) or outside school where employers are present	15.2%
Written report at the end of the fellowship (including professional development benefits and employment outcomes)	24.2%
Report on job search activities	57.6%
Timesheets signed by supervising attorney	36.4%
Reporting during fellowship	48.5%
Exit interview	12.1%
None	15.1%

* Note: Percentages add to more than 100 because more than one option could be chosen.

- Additional comments indicate that exit evaluations are common, and some require employment outcomes information before issuing final payment at the end of a fellowship.
- Fellows are most frequently paid on a stipend basis (83%). A small number of schools report paying a salary, with a fifth of the programs paying an hourly wage. (Percentages add to more than 100 because more than one option could be chosen.)
- Most schools (69%) report paying all fellows the same compensation. For those who did not, the most common reasons were additional funding from interested donors for some programs or varying hours worked.
- Of the schools reporting a bridge-to-practice program, 24 were able to report the total amount of funding for their Class of 2014 fellows. As shown in Table 3, funding levels varied widely, and were significantly lower on the high end than in 2012. Collectively, these 24 schools provided almost \$5.1 million in bridge-to-practice fellowship funding. In 2012, 32 schools reported total funding of almost \$8.5 million.

Table 3. Total Funding for Class of 2014 Fellowships (per school)

Range of funding	\$20,000 – \$750,000
25th percentile	\$61,062
Median	\$148,080
75th percentile	\$355,250
Average	\$212,386

- The most common source of funding for the programs is the law school’s operating budget (75% — up from 67% in 2012), followed by an outside grant (such as a dedicated alumni gift or foundational gift) at 34%, and an endowment or other restricted fund at 22%. (Percentages add to more than 100 because more than one funding source could be reported.)
- For most programs, paychecks were issued by the law school (70%), with 27% being issued by the parent university and 15% being issued by the host employer. (Percentages add to more than 100 because more than one option could be chosen.)

- For federal tax purposes, two-thirds of the schools reported issuing 1099 forms and one-third reported issuing W-2s.
- Only a small percentage (6%) of the schools allowed fellows to enroll in the school's health care plan regardless of whether the fellow had to pay all or part of the premium.
- Thirty-one schools were able to provide a count of the fellowships awarded to their Class of 2014. Collectively, these 31 programs funded a total of 779 fellows. The number of fellowships per school ranged from 1 to 86, with a median of 16 and an average of 25.
- The 31 schools reporting a total number of fellowships also reported their counts by type of employer. Consistent with other findings for the Class of 2014,

nearly half of the 779 placements accounted for were in public interest organizations (48%). Second were government placements (34%), followed by 12% in the judiciary, 3% in private firms, 1% in business, and 2% in other placements (all but one of which was categorized as education). These numbers are consistent with those obtained for the Class of 2012 except for placements with private firms, which decreased about 4% from 2011.

We will continue the discussion of bridge-to-practice programs at the 2016 Annual Education Conference.

NALP's Director of Research, Judith N. Collins contributed her expertise to the survey and to this article.