

Opening Doors: Enhancing Access to Postgraduate Public Interest Fellowships

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Who We Are

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Who You Are



Objectives

- Gain a foundational understanding of the types of public interest fellowships—including their core purposes—to effectively support law students in determining whether and how to pursue them.
- Examine the value of postgraduate fellowships through the lens of key stakeholders, including law schools, employers, and fellowship funders.
- Identify barriers to fellowship access and equity challenges, explore current strategies being implemented to address these issues, and consider what additional efforts are needed and by whom.
- Engage in a collaborative discussion on strategies to broaden access to fellowships, including innovative approaches to expanding funding and institutional support.

Fellowship Components & Terminology



Cari Carson ← **Fellow**

Supervising Attorney - Education Team
Disability Rights North Carolina
Raleigh, NC

University of Michigan Law School



Fellowship
Legal Aid of North Carolina - Advocates for Children's Services
Durham, NC



Provided trauma-informed direct representation for court-involved youth in special education matters to decrease the number of youth experiencing school failure and its consequences.

Types of Public Interest Fellowships

- **Organizational fellowships** (*Fellowship is specific to one organization*)
 - Southern Environmental Law Center – Glynn D. Key Associate Attorney Fellowship
 - ACLU Racial Justice Program – Marvin M. Karpatkin Fellowship
 - Center for Constitutional Rights – The Justice Fellowship
- **Project-based fellowships** (*Fellowship can be obtained by any eligible organization*)
 - Skadden Fellowship
 - Equal Justice Works Fellowship
 - Justice Catalyst Fellowship

**Be sure to explore smaller funders!*

Types of Public Interest Fellowships

- **Government Fellowships**
 - City, State, and Federal
- **Law Firm-Sponsored Fellowships**
 - Norton Rose Fellowship – The Door
 - Fried Frank Civil Rights Fellowship – MALDEF or NAACP LDF
- **Clinic/Law School Fellowships**
 - Georgetown University Law Center Fellowships
 - Yale Law School – Robert L. Bernstein Fellowships in International Human Rights
- **Cohort Fellowships**
 - Immigrant Justice Corps – Justice Fellowship
 - If/When/How – Reproductive Justice Fellowship Program
 - Equal Justice Works – Crime Victims Advocacy, Disaster Resilience, Opioid Crisis Response Fellowships
- **Bar Association Fellowships**
 - ABA NextGen Fellows
 - National Trans Bar Association – Tyron Garner Law Fellow: Lambda Legal

Value of Postgraduate Fellowships

- **For Fellows**

- Opportunity to pursue a passion and dive deeply into a specific area of law
- Develop project design, implementation, and advocacy skills
- Gain professional development, leadership training, and resume enhancement
- Access to a cohort, alumni network, or other institutional supports
- Strong pathway to long-term public interest employment

- **For Law Schools**

- Graduates engage in mission-driven social justice work
- Raises the profile of public interest work within the school; fellows often return as mentors, speakers, or faculty
- Supports graduate placement in competitive public interest roles

- **For Clients & Community Partners**

- Launch of new projects or services addressing unmet legal needs
- Communities served in more innovative and responsive ways
- Influx of passionate, well-trained entry-level attorneys with their dream jobs

Value of Postgraduate Fellowships

- **For Employers/Host Organizations**

- Increased capacity and impact
- Funding support and cost savings
- Pipeline for future talent and organizational growth
- Strengthened reputation and partnerships
- Expansion into new areas

- **For Funders**

- Fulfill mission (e.g., to meet client needs, launch/support careers, support non-profits)
- May create additional collaborative opportunities (e.g., between fellows, for pro bono work)

Navigating Fellowship Limitations

- **For Fellows & Law Schools**

- Law students express interest in addressing a broad social justice issue without identifying a specific legal problem and solution
- Law students partner with organization to increase their capacity to serve clients generally
- Project ideas are underdeveloped—lacking a clear timeline, structure, defined goals, and measurable objectives
- Students may not seek enough feedback—recommend multiple rounds of drafting, revising, and fine-tuning with guidance from supervisors, faculty, and career services

- **For Employers**

- Be mindful that this work may not materialize into a fellowship
- Navigating limited or fluctuating funding and ensuring clarity in the hiring process
- Balancing meaningful, substantive work with the organization's capacity to provide adequate training and oversight
- Creating a stable and supportive environment, especially if the fellow is in a newly created or isolated role. Establishing a clear structure for onboarding, professional development, and inclusion in the workplace.
- Managing expectations for continued employment post-fellowship and supporting the fellow's career transition if needed
- Meeting grant or fellowship requirements, ethical obligations, and logistical needs such as licensure support and work arrangements

Equity Considerations for Law Students & Law Schools

- **Challenge #1: Fellowship funding below entry-level public interest salaries**
 - Advocate for increased funding (salary + direct support) to align more closely with entry-level compensation
 - Encourage employers to commit to livable wages—even beyond fellowship amounts—and be transparent about salaries
 - Law schools, employers, and funders should educate students on PSLF and LRAP options
- **Challenge #2: Limited duration and post-fellowship uncertainty**
 - Schools should invest in internally funded fellowships when possible
 - Funders can commit to providing consistent support to fellows and employers throughout the fellowship, including during transitions
- **Challenge #3: Need for strong mentorship (“kitchen cabinet”)**
 - Law school pipeline programs should support fellowship application development and provide funding where possible
 - Law schools should demystify the process—ensure students receive guidance from career services, faculty, and alumni*
 - Model and teach networking strategies and encourage outreach to funders and host organizations for help*
 - Help students assess organizations for equity—from proposal development to workplace culture and lawyering approach
- **Challenge #4: Limited employer-school relationships hinder fellow recruitment**
 - Expand outreach between employers and law schools—especially HBCUs, state/regional schools, and those with strong public interest programs
 - Build partnerships with affinity groups, mentoring programs, and diversity initiatives to broaden access
- **Challenge #5: Law firm salaries and predictable timelines compete for top talent**
 - Offer clear, timely guidance to students, especially those without access to established professional networks
 - Ensure law students know about the range of fellowships, including those funded by law firms; consider seeking a law firm deferment
 - Advocate for earlier decision timelines from public interest fellowships

Equity Considerations for Employers/Host Organizations

- **Challenge #1: Fellowships provide temporary funding without long-term financial support, making it difficult for organizations to retain fellows or sustain projects beyond the fellowship term.**
 - Provide transparency and advocate for multi-year or renewable funding models that allow organizations to plan beyond the initial fellowship
Partner with funders to explore cost-sharing models or bridge grants that help retain fellows after their fellowship ends
 - Engage in strategic fundraising to integrate fellowships into long-term organizational goals
 - Develop internal structures that allow fellows to engage in different type of work to expand their skillsets
- **Challenge #2: Fellowship opportunities and visibility are often concentrated in major metropolitan areas and at institutions with prior fellowship experience.**
 - Employers should strengthen partnerships with law schools and funders to increase awareness and support for fellowships in underrepresented areas
 - Encourage funders to support stipends for relocation costs, remote work options, or hybrid fellowship models that allow fellows to work in underserved areas
- **Challenge #3: Many fellowships have rigid structures that don't align with every organization's needs, limiting opportunities for innovative legal work.**
 - Push for and design more flexible fellowship structures that allow for evolving project scopes

Equity Considerations for Employers/Host Organizations

- **Challenge #4: Fellows leave after one or two years, making it difficult for organizations to invest in continuity of services.**
 - Develop clear pathways for fellows to transition into permanent roles, including succession planning and pipeline hiring strategies
 - Advocate for post-fellowship funding opportunities, such as additional grants to support long-term retention
 - Encourage fellowship programs to integrate career development resources that support fellows in securing future funding or employment
 - Build relationships with alumni networks of fellowship programs to facilitate mentorship and job placement opportunities
- **Challenge #5: Some opportunities focus on diversity without addressing broader organizational equity issues, leaving fellows from underrepresented backgrounds without sufficient institutional support.**
 - Ensure that diversity initiatives go beyond recruitment and include meaningful mentorship, leadership opportunities, and organizational inclusion efforts
 - Provide training for supervisors and staff on creating an equitable and supportive environment for fellows
 - Establish feedback mechanisms where fellows can voice concerns about equity and inclusion within the organization
 - Encourage fellowship programs to assess their impact on diversity, equity, and inclusion beyond just numbers, ensuring that fellows have a positive and sustainable experience

Equity Considerations for Fellowship Funders

- **Before Fellowship: Designing and implementing an equitable outreach and selection process**
 - Provide accessible information
 - Offer tips and guidance
 - Be accessible to answer questions
 - Facilitate mentorship of applicants
- **During Fellowship: Employer can fall short, impeding funder's mission**
 - Law schools can support applicants in robustly evaluating potential host organizations
 - Funders can advocate for fellow, support their self-advocacy, or move them mid-fellowship
- **After Fellowship: Support attorneys to stay in public interest long-term**
 - Career mentorship during (and after) the fellowship term
 - Informal networks, ongoing training
 - Post-fellowship funds for ongoing public interest work

**Additional equity
considerations?**



Thank You!

Questions?