

# Best Law Schools FOR Public Interest

Law schools commit to helping its public service career-minded students make their dreams a reality with clinical opportunities, faculty involvement and access to loan repayment assistance.

BY MICHELLE WEYENBERG

**T**he commitment to public interest at the **University of Maryland School of Law** reached new heights last spring when it sent 13 students to work in Namibia, China and Mexico, as part of their new International and Comparative Law Clinic.

Emily Siedell, Carlos Guevara and Eric Kunimoto were three of the pioneering students to kick off the first year of the clinical program. The students, now in their third year, spent eight weeks getting experience in global issues while helping strengthen legal systems and increasing access to justice in developing nations.

“The greatest experience for me was visiting these Chinese citizens in these remote villages,” said Kunimoto, who was one of three students to go to China. “The interviews were supposed to take 20 or 30 minutes, but they would go on for two hours because I got so invested.”

The public service ethic is ingrained in the fabric of schools like The University of Maryland, **City University of New York School of Law**, **Wake Forest University School of Law** and **Rutgers**

**State University of New Jersey School of Law-Newark**.

“Sometimes people look at public interest or pro bono work as an extracurricular activity,” said Blake Morant, dean of Wake Forest University, and recipient of the John R. Kramer Outstanding Law School Dean Award from Equal Justice Works, an organization devoted to getting new legal talent in the nonprofit and public sectors. “We saw this as a very important part of the education of the student. Giving back is about being a true lawyer.”

Law schools overall have increased their commitment to public service over the past 15 years. This year, preLaw magazine is recognizing 96 law schools — almost half of those in the U.S. — for making an above average commitment to public service. When this magazine’s sister publication — *The National Jurist* — first published public interest rankings in 1994, it recognized only 10 law schools.

That increase in commitment across the board helped 2009 graduates who faced new challenges after graduation. Several big law firms deferred new hires and gave them the opportunity to work at public interest

jobs. Many of the young lawyers have now decided to stay in public service instead of returning to their firms after the deferral ends, as reported by the New York Times in August. Some of these graduates say that though they thought the deferral process was wrong, in the end, it had them pursue what they wanted to do in the first place — public service.

Educators say more students are holding on to their attraction to public interest throughout law school. For some, an interest in public service is why they go to law school, but a large debt load and a traditional pipeline move them toward the private sector.

But some law schools are better than others at helping students stay focused on public service and preparing them for a career in the field. preLaw magazine has run the numbers on all law schools to identify which do the best job. At the top of the list are two very different law schools — Yale Law School and CUNY.

The rankings weight schools in three categories: curriculum (which includes courses and clinical opportunities), cost of legal education (tuition, debt and loan



University of Maryland School of Law students, from left, Emily Siedell, Eric Kunimoto and Carlos Guevara participated in the law school's new International and Comparative Law Clinic last spring, which brought them to China, Mexico and Namibia.

PHOTO BY BRUCE BUCKLEY

repayment options), and placement (the percent of graduates who work in public service).

CUNY ranks first in placement, followed by **Yale, Vermont Law School, University of Oregon** and **American University**. CUNY also ranks first in curriculum, followed by University of Maryland, **Northeastern, Gonzaga** and **Stanford**.

### Clinical Education: the key to preparing for a career in public service

Sameer Ashar, associate dean for clinical programs at CUNY, said clinical work is essential more so in public interest law than any part of the practice.

“Students come out of law school immediately working with people,” Ashar said. “They kind of have to hit the job running, with no formal on-the-job training.”

Of CUNY’s seven clinics, the Community and Economic Development Clinic is particularly popular right now, as immigration issues continue to draw a lot of student interest. The law school requires every student participate in a clinic or

externship while in law school.

“We try to transition them into practice through that experience,” Ashar said.

Law is dynamic and learning law in the classroom is essential, but it needs to take a step further to see how it actually works, said Wake Forest’s Dean Morant. Clinics help do that. At the same time, these clinics work for individuals. They are learning what a traditional lawyer actually does.

“A true professional lawyer is one that not only has great academic competence, but truly recognizes his/her function in society,” Morant said.

For many of the law schools, strategic plans are set up connecting the law school with a variety of different communities needing assistance.

Like CUNY, Rutgers-Newark’s most popular clinic is community law.

“Our clinicians help people with real estate closings, patents, copyright issues,” Dean Farmer said. “We offer the full range of business-related services to people who are trying to start enterprises in urban areas. The opportunity for learning is tremendous. Students get to learn so many things: contract drafting, zoning conflicts, counsel-

ing small businesses and non-profits. And it actually helps rebuilding communities in the process.”

Clinical opportunities vary by school and geography — from criminal law to elder care.

**Boston University School of Law** is coming up on 50 years of clinical education. With an impressive alumni support system, every law school panel has at least one public interest or pro bono representative on it. The goal is to help students meet people from different backgrounds and areas of the law, said Maura Kelly, assistant dean of the career development and public service for Boston University.

“We truly try to match students’ interests with opportunities,” she said. “Many students are trying to figure out how to include public interest in their lives, full time or through private practice.”

The law school is also open to students suggesting new clinics/pro bono work. For example, one student who did some work with the Innocence Clinic suggested a new clinic on detention issues. They found an alum who is an expert in asylum and immigration, who is now teaching on a part-time

# Best Public Interest Law Schools

- A+**
- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | City University of New York School of Law |
| 2 | Yale Law School                           |

- A**
- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 3  | Rutgers School of Law-Newark                       |
| 4  | Stanford Law School                                |
| 5  | University of California at Berkeley School of Law |
| 6  | Arizona State University College of Law            |
| 7  | University of Maryland School of Law               |
| 8  | Loyola Law School, Los Angeles                     |
| 9  | Lewis and Clark Law School                         |
| 10 | The Ohio State University College of Law           |
| 11 | Northeastern University School of Law              |
| 12 | Harvard University Law School                      |
| 13 | University of Oregon School of Law                 |
| 14 | American University, Washington College of Law     |
| 15 | West Virginia University College of Law            |
| 16 | University of California at Davis School of Law    |
| 17 | Brooklyn Law School                                |
| 18 | Vermont Law School                                 |
| 19 | Indiana University School of Law-Bloomington       |
| 20 | University of Wisconsin Law School                 |

**A-**

- |   |
|---|
| Columbia University School of Law                     |
| Georgetown University Law Center                      |
| Gonzaga University School of Law                      |
| Loyola University School of Law, Chicago              |
| North Carolina Central University School of Law       |
| Temple University School of Law                       |
| The University of Michigan Law School                 |
| University of California at Los Angeles School of Law |
| University of Colorado School of Law                  |
| University of Iowa College of Law                     |
| University of Maine School of Law                     |
| University of Nebraska College of Law                 |
| University of Tennessee College of Law                |
| University of Utah College of Law                     |
| University of Washington School of Law                |
| William & Mary School of Law                          |

**B+**

- |   |
|---|
| Boston University School of Law                               |
| Cleveland State University, Cleveland-Marshall College of Law |
| Cornell Law School  |
| DePaul University College of Law                              |
| Golden Gate University School of Law                          |
| Hamline University School of Law                              |
| Mercer University Law School                                  |
| Northwestern University School of Law                         |
| Seattle University School of Law                              |
| South Texas College of Law                                    |
| The Pennsylvania State University, Dickinson School of Law    |
| Touro College   |
| Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center                                 |
| University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law          |
| University of Baltimore School of Law                         |
| University of Miami School of Law                             |
| University of Minnesota Law School                            |
| University of North Carolina School of Law                    |
| University of Pittsburgh School of Law                        |
| University of San Diego School of Law                         |
| University of South Carolina School of Law                    |
| University of Virginia School of Law                          |
| Villanova University School of Law                            |
| Washington and Lee University School of Law                   |

**How we did the rankings**

This year's list has 96 Best Public Interest Law Schools, with each assigned a letter grade of A+, A, A-, B+, B or B-. CUNY, Yale Law School, Rutgers-Newark, Stanford Law School and the University of California at Berkeley School of Law round out the Top 5 law schools.

Law schools make the Best Public Interest Law School rankings if they meet three main criteria: have one or more public interest clinics; have one or more faculty committees/administrators that oversee public interest; and have a loan repayment assistance program. By definition, a school that does not have all three would receive a grade below a B-.

We then weighted the schools using three main categories: cost of legal education, placement and curriculum. For cost of legal education we factored in tuition (10 percent), public interest scholarship opportunities (2 percent), quality of LRAP program (8 percent) and a calculation of average debt payments minus average loan forgiveness (20 percent). For placement we factored in percent of graduates placed in public service, with greater weight being given for placement in public interest (32 percent). (Public service includes clerkships and government.) For curriculum, we factored in pro bono opportunities (3 percent), public interest courses offered (15 percent), public interest clinics (5 percent), and number of clinic positions to enrollment (5 percent).

All of the categories reflect the same areas that Equal Justice Works recommends students consider when investigating law schools. The preLaw ranking was compiled independently by staff editors and did not reflect the views of Equal Justice Works.

The Top 20 law schools are ranked, and the law schools in the remaining letter grades appear in alphabetical order.

preLaw magazine has ranked schools for public interest in the past, most recently 2008. This study reflects new factors and weights that the editors felt best matched the data available and what makes a great public interest law school.

**B**

Albany Law School  
 Boston College Law School  
 Chicago-Kent College of Law  
 Creighton University School of Law  
 Duke University School of Law  
 Duquesne University School of Law  
 George Washington University National Law Center  
 Hofstra University School of Law  
 Indiana University School of Law, Indianapolis  
 Seton Hall University School of Law  
 Suffolk University Law School  
 The Catholic University of America School of Law  
 The University of Texas School of Law  
 University of California, Hastings College of the Law  
 University of Chicago Law School  
 University of Pennsylvania Law School  
 Wake Forest University School of Law  
 Washington University School of Law

**B-**

Capital University Law School  
 Chapman University School of Law  
 Emory University School of Law  
 Fordham University School of Law  
 John Marshall Law School  
 Marquette University Law School  
 Mississippi College School of Law  
 New York Law School  
 Pepperdine University School of Law  
 Roger Williams University School of Law  
 Santa Clara University School of Law  
 St. Thomas University School of Law  
 University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law  
 Vanderbilt University School of Law  
 Whittier Law School  
 Widener University School of Law  
 Willamette University College of Law  
 William Mitchell College of Law

basis. The clinic will start this spring.

“It’s a great model that shows we are listening to students and hearing what their needs are and those of the community,” Kelly said.

Emily Siedell, a third year who spent last spring in Namibia for Maryland’s International and Comparative Law Clinic, said the people they worked with were very inspiring.

“They had hope despite so many hardships,” she said.

There were four projects in Namibia, but due to time, Siedell only worked on two, helping set up businesses and litigation over sterilizations.

“We discovered that the artists working there in the craft centers had to pay rent on the stalls they were using, and sometimes they only got a small percentage of their commission from the stall owners,” she said. “We worked with them on how to improve their livelihood, how to start their own businesses and become self-sustaining.”

The other project required her to travel to the northern region, where they have the highest concentration of HIV. There, the students did workshops on women’s rights when it came to the sterilization of women during the time when they went into the hospital for cesarean sections.

“At times, it could be frustrating because there’s so much change you want to create,” Siedell said. “But the most rewarding thing was being part of that process. We were the ones to start [the clinic] off.”

Mike Millemann, Jacob France Professor of public interest law of the University of Maryland, said the ICL clinic had more than 30 applicants for the first year.

The clinic, which admitted 13 more students for the 2010-2011 academic year, builds on the law school’s groundbreaking LEAD Initiative, which helps students develop the cross-cultural competence they will need to practice law in today’s global arena.

“In designing the clinic, we decided to do something that most international clinics have not done, which is to place students in the country for substantial periods of time (and) have full-time faculty that go with students,” Millemann said.

Third-year Eric Kunimoto’s project in China focused on helping people develop a micro-credit loan program and small-business finance. They particularly looked at small farmers and women who otherwise have been kept out of the mainstream of Chinese finance.

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One highlight, Kunimoto said, was the supervising professor from Maryland who also taught at a university in Beijing.

Faculty involvement plays a huge role in the success of a public interest program.

When students come to law school,

their primary role models are the faculty, said Wake Forest's Dean Morant. To be fair, faculty are very busy, but if it's done right, the clinical teaching can be very innovative and contribute further to the scholarly dialogue.

"When we were putting together the pro bono section, it started with faculty," Morant said. "They helped the pro bono effort get crystallized in a particular way. It was amazing to see how many people were giving themselves in a variety of different ways. I think it's critical to have faculty who support this program for one and by their actions show that they are giving of themselves to society."

Dean Morant said it's gratifying to see how public interest has come of age in the 21st century.

"It's an integral part in legal education," he said. "Doing public service is not only a philanthropic or volunteer effort that shows goodwill, but more of a goodwill enterprise to show the fluidity and education of law."

### Funding and repayment

"What I would like people to understand is that it is more affordable than ever for people to practice in public interest," said Heather Jarvis, a senior program manager for Equal Justice Works. "Even though law school remains extremely expensive... there are more options to help them afford them."

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**LAW**

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First thing to note is that the schools with the highest tuition and fees are not always the most expensive in the end, because students could receive more grants and private funding, Jarvis said. While it's important to consider the cost, it can also be more complicated than just looking at tuition.

"There is a whole landscape of debt release programs," Jarvis said. Some law schools have school-based, state-based or employer-based loan repayment assistance programs.

preLaw magazine's rankings look at LRAP, tuition and a calculation that compares average debt payment for each school minus the average LRAP payment. Not surprisingly, most of the schools at the top of the cost of education category are public schools — Rutgers, West Virginia University, The Ohio State, University of Nebraska and University of Maryland are all in the top six. But Stanford ranks third and Yale ranks seventh based on strong LRAP programs.

When it comes to evaluating any LRAP, students need to be thinking about the design of the program. For example, which



PHOTO BY RYAN FIELD

CUNY's Sameer Ashar (above), associate dean for clinical programs, said clinical work is the essential part of the public interest practice. Third-year students Katie Engst (left) and Terri Nilliasca currently participate in CUNY's Immigrant and Refugee Rights Clinic.

employment qualifies for assistance? All LRAP programs are not created equally. If you plan on working in the government sector of public interest law, be sure that LRAP program of the law school of your choice covers you under that type of employment.

It's also important to know which loans are eligible for assistance. Does it cover undergraduate loans or part-time employment? And, how is the award amount determined? Many LRAPs also have salary caps or specific amounts of indebtedness that are required to qualify. These are all good questions to answer, Jarvis said.

"Law school-base LRAPs are only as

strong as the school," she said. "Students need to look a little deeper."

The real hot issue is public service loan forgiveness at the federal level. Students need to understand student loans and avoid private student loans. Private loans aren't accepted under the Federal Loan Forgiveness Program.

Though the Federal Loan Forgiveness Program has the same requirements for everyone, there is still a need for strong school-based LRAP programs, Jarvis said.

The latest information from Equal Justice shows that it's still around 100 law schools that have LRAPs. But what varies a lot is the average annual award. Though



"The greatest experience for me was visiting these Chinese citizens in these remote villages. The interviews were supposed to take 20 or 30 minutes, but they would go on for two hours because I got so invested."

—Eric Kunimoto, 3L, University of Maryland School of Law

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many are giving much higher rewards than before, most programs still only give modest benefits. Those that give larger amounts — like Yale, Harvard and Stanford — have access to large endowments.

Rutgers-Newark has a long history of public service. It was among one of the first clinical programs nationwide, established mostly in the late 1960s as a consequence of the Newark riots. This represented the law school's reinvestment in the community there.

An anonymous donor who is an alumnus of the law school today largely funds the LRAP program, which began in 1998, said John Farmer, dean of Rutgers-Newark.



PHOTO BY BRUCE BUCKLEY

The alum went into public-service work after law school and wanted to recognize the school's commitment and the Rutgers tradition. Over the past 10 years, more than \$1 million has been provided to students who go into public interest work to help them repay their student loans and do this.

"LRAP benefits are for people who need it," Jarvis said. "Not only are you in debt but you earn a low salary in public interest." This is where the federal law has stepped in to assist. The federal law helps for debt and employment in any area of public interest.

It's true that the pay gap between public interest and private firm work is steep. These figures can be seen from the latest "Jobs & JDs report for the Class of 2009" by the National Association of Law Placement. Medians for government, judicial clerkships and public interest jobs changed little from 2008 at \$52,000, \$50,000 and \$42,800 respectively.

Over one quarter, 25.8 percent, of the Class of 2009 graduates who reported being employed on Feb. 15, 2010, were working in public service positions, including government jobs, the military, judicial clerkships and public interest positions.

This percentage has also remained relatively stable for almost three decades.

For students like Carlos Guevara, a third year at Maryland who also participated in the International and Comparative Law clinic, their experiences while in law school


can greatly impact their future.

"For me, personally, it had an impact," said Guevara, who spent last spring in Mexico. "I saw my country in a different light, and that was an incredible experience." ■

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Lauren Parris, 2011, was selected for a coveted year-long internship in retail and operations at Amazon.com, and was a summer associate with Hellsell Fetterman, LLP. Those experiences defined her path, and her affinity for business law.




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