What are you looking for?

Once you decide to try public interest, you next need to figure out what interests you. To do this, we suggest some honest self-assessment. We are here to help you with this. Below are some things to ask yourself and think about, in order to have a better idea about what type of public interest work to pursue. It is ok if you don’t have answers to all of these questions! Many people are not sure what exactly interests them; other people are interested in everything. You will refine and change your ideas as you gain more experience. Thinking about these questions now will give you a better idea of which direction(s) to start to explore. Use the Self-Assessment Wheel below to further explore these questions.

PROFESSIONAL GOALS

• Why did you come to law school?
• Who you want to serve? For example, are you interested in helping an individual? A group of individuals? A community? The government? A non-profit institution?
• How do you want to spend your time? For example, do you like research and writing? Investigative reporting and documentation? Interviewing and representing clients? Drafting legal education materials or policy manuals? Engaging in oral advocacy? Organizing grassroots efforts? Or a little bit of everything?
• What timeframe appeals to you? Are you more interested in short-term projects with immediate results? Or long-term assignments, focusing on eventual systemic impact? Or both?
• What work environment do you want? For example, does working in a small office appeal to you, or would you prefer a larger office? Do you enjoy an informal setting, or does more formality and hierarchy appeal to you? Do you want flexible hours? Are you willing to travel? How important is having a support staff to help with your work?
• What are your short-term and long-term career goals? Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 10 years?

PERSONAL GOALS

• What geographic region do you want to be in? For example, do you want to work overseas? In the U.S.? In an urban area? A rural setting? Somewhere in between?
• Do you have family obligations that you need to consider?
• How important is prestige to you?
• How important is the level of your income?

INTERESTS

• What have you found interesting in law school?
• Outside of law school, what hobbies and activities have you been drawn to?
• What legal issues interest you? (See the Appendix to learn about the range of possibilities).

SKILLS

• What skills, experience and knowledge do you have already?
• What skills, experience and knowledge do you want to develop?

ADVOCACY TOOLS

• What organizational strategies and tactics appeal to you? For example, are you interested in working with individual clients on their individual issues? Would you rather focus on the “big picture”, bringing change to benefit a group of people, or to change legal precedent? Would you like to do grassroots work, helping a community bring about change for itself? Would you like to be in a courtroom? In a legislative setting? What about being behind the scenes, reporting on human rights violations? Or using media and social media to bring change? See Appendix for further discussion.

VALUES

• Does a traditional legal approach appeal to you, or do you prefer organizations with a more holistic or multidisciplinary approach? For example, some organizations match each client with a lawyer and social worker who work together as a team to serve the client. Other organizations have economists and sociologists working alongside community organizers. Does this type of less traditional legal approach appeal to you?
• How risk-averse are you?
• How important are ideology or political compatibility? Do you see yourself as an activist?
• What else is important to you?
In determining your interests, think about:

1. What do you hope to accomplish with your law degree?
2. How might your personal life influence your career choices?
3. In determining your interests, think about:
   - What organizational strategies & tactics appeal to you?
   - How do organizational strategies & tactics appeal to you?
   - Do personal values have a role?

Self-Assessment Wheel:
- Advocacy
  - Grassroot Advocacy/Community Organizing
  - Investigative Research/Reporting
  - Legislative/Regulatory
  - Media
  - Other
- Tools
  - Working with Clients
  - Litigation
  - Multicultural Sensitivity
  - Negotiation
  - Research & Writing
- Values
  - Traditional/Multidisciplinary
  - Risk Aversion
  - Ideology
  - Public Service Experience
  - General Knowledge or Subject Matter
  - Language
- Skills
  - Interpersonal Skills
  - Research & Writing
  - Language
  - Public Speaking
- Interests
  - Student Organizations
  - Hobbies/Activities
  - Classes
  - Speakers/Panels

What attributes, experiences, or knowledge do you have to offer? What do you want to develop?
Don’t worry if you don’t know exactly what you want to do. You may need to try different things before you find the “right” fit. We encourage law students to explore by doing internships, externships, clinics, classes, pro bono, research, work with student organizations and so forth. (See below for more information on how to do this). You are not making decisions about your entire career. Practitioners often continue to explore, by doing pro bono work if in private practice, or by networking and working in coalition with other organizations to learn about other public interest practice areas. Many public interest lawyers change practice areas and even entire fields throughout their working lives.

What else might make me a good fit?
Once you have a general idea of the type of public interest organization and or advocacy mechanism that interests you, you should also consider how to make yourself a competitive candidate. In addition to building up your experience (see following section), there are other attributes that employers look for. You may already have some of these and you can develop them if you don’t.

Demonstrated commitment to their issues or the social good is an important criterion for many public interest employers in making hiring decisions, both for the summer and for full-time work. Public interest employers want to hire people who believe in something and have done something about it - it is not sufficient to be a "good person" or have "good thoughts". Having a genuine and demonstrated interest (such as past legal or non-legal work or volunteer experience) in serving the public good is very important. No employer expects a law student to have vast experience, but you should work to build your experience throughout law school so that you are a highly competitive candidate when you graduate. (See following section). Similarly, graduates looking to switch fields need to build up their pro bono experience to make themselves competitive in their new field. The more an applicant can demonstrate their dedication to an organization’s issues, clients or advocacy approach, the more appealing that candidate will be.

Particular knowledge and skills can be helpful but may not be critical. Many public interest employers know that they will have to educate and train summer and entry level or even mid-career employees and are looking for the capacity and willingness to learn. However, different employers emphasize different things based on their particular issue areas and advocacy strategies - and you may have some of the things they are looking for. For example: if you have foreign language skills, you should think about applying to employers who work on international issues or serve immigrant clients; interpersonal skills
are important to organizations that deal directly with clients or engage in work with partner organizations; research and writing skills are important to organizations that draft laws or policy papers or legal briefs or educational materials; debate or public speaking skills would be of interest to organizations engaged in oral advocacy or community organizing; and so forth. See the Appendix to learn more about which types of organizations fall into these categories.

In addition, even if you don’t have a legal background in their area, you may have general knowledge of the subject matter that could be handy. For example, having a background as a teacher might be important to an education-advocacy organization; or experience as a camp counselor may bolster your application to children’s rights organizations; or having a finance or corporate background would likely be a big selling point for a financial regulatory agency; or having a science or technical background might be important to an environmental advocacy organization.

You should be prepared to make arguments as to why your particular skill set or background would be helpful to that employer, even if it is not exactly what they do. Please remember that SJI can help you with this! Also, if your interest or knowledge stems from personal or family issues, please brainstorm with us about how to present this information.

**Initiative and Responsibility and Good Judgment** are very valued by public interest employers. Public interest organizations do not hire hoards of associates to follow orders and perform repetitive tasks. Summer interns and new lawyers often are given responsibility for their own matters and are expected to take the initiative. Employers seek those who can work independently and ask for help when they need it. Initiative and independence are especially important for jobs overseas. If you are able to demonstrate ways you have taken initiative in the past, you could be a more competitive applicant.

**Character** is important. Most public interest organizations are small; and people work intensely for long hours and little financial reward. One of the benefits is working with others they trust, respect and can enjoy. If you are someone who others enjoy being around and can depend on, this can help your application. Think about how to convey this in the tone of your letter or how you act in the interview.

**How do I explore public interest opportunities (and build up my public interest credentials)?**

During law school, there are many opportunities to explore public interest. During 1L year, students can attend public interest programming (including SJI Mondays and other SJI panels and programs which you will learn
about via email), participate in student organizations, start exploring pro bono opportunities, and of course, work in public interest over the summer. In addition, students can begin networking at job fairs like the Public Interest Legal Career (PILC) fair held at NYU in February, and by talking to other students, professors, SJI staff and so forth.

During 2L and 3L years, students can continue to attend public interest programming, do term-time internships and externships, work on public-interest journals, participate in clinics, work with (or lead) student organizations, work for professors, do pro bono work, continue networking at events like the Public Interest Career Reception in August, and at job fairs like Equal Justice Works (EJW) in Washington DC in October and the PILC Fair in February.

2Ls can work in public interest positions over the summer, and start planning for post-graduation employment by networking, exploring fellowship sponsorship and so forth.

3Ls can continue this process, while beginning to apply for fellowships and permanent positions.

What are some good resources for me to start with?

Please review SJI’s webinars on Summer Funding Fellowships, and Job Search Strategies.

To learn about specific organizations, PSJD@nalp.org (formerly PSLawnet.org) is a great resource. You can search by subject and location, and learn about organizations and jobs.

To get the “inside scoop” on summer internships, be sure to read summer intern evaluations on CLS’s Public Interest Database (www.law.columbia.edu/lawnet, under “Student Services”).

For government work, you should see the “Arizona Guide” at www.law.arizona.edu/career/honorshandbook.cfm (our password is on our SJI Guides page: https://web.law.columbia.edu/social-justice/students/careers-public-service/resources-publications/sji-guides).

Additional resources are available on the government pages on PSJD@nalp.org, or www.usajobs.opm.gov/ or www.govtjobs.com.

In addition to this Guide, SJI also has a number of guides on our website and in our office. We also send out weekly emails with job information and job postings.