INTRODUCTION

The purpose of a public interest interview is to determine whether you and the employer are a “good match.”

The employer is looking to hire someone who has the outlook, knowledge, skills and personality that suit the organization’s goals and style. The employer will be assessing your commitment to the issues and your past experience, as well as assessing how well you would fit into their office.

You are looking for a job that will let you use your talents, energy and skills to work for something you believe in, with people you like. The interview is a mutual fact-finding mission – the goal is to get the right job for you, not just any job.

Tip! There is no standard format for a public interest interview. An interview can be one-on-one (by itself, or with a half or full day of interviews back-to-back), or a group interview. It can be in-person, or via phone, or Skype (see below). You might have more than one round of interviews. (For example, DA’s offices often have three or four rounds for permanent positions).

You need to “wow” them and really sell yourself, even though this may feel uncomfortable.

For “table talk” sessions, see separate information in this Handbook.

GETTING PREPARED

Research the employer. Read the employer’s website thoroughly, google the organization, read student evaluations (if available) on Columbia’s Lawnet database, talk to people (such as former interns, professors or SJI staff), read about the organization’s work in Lexus/Nexus or other searchable databases etc. If you know who is interviewing you, research them too.

Think about how you will explain [if applicable]: Why this organization? Why these legal issues? Why this advocacy approach? Why these clients/communities? Why this location? You want to be thoughtful and reasoned in your answers. Also think about: Why am I a good fit for the job? How would this job fit with my background and goals.
and personality? THE MORE YOU HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT THIS, THE MORE CONFIDENT AND ENTHUSIASTIC YOU WILL SOUND. Convince the employer this is your dream job (without sounding cheesy or making it sound like all you care about is furthering your own career goals).

- Especially for organizations that focus on specific statutes or constitutional provisions, become familiar with the basic law in their area of practice. (Sometimes this is on their websites). Research the leading cases in the area of interest to this employer - including ones the employer has litigated. This is likely to be more important for permanent jobs than summer jobs; however, employers' expectations will vary and it cannot hurt to be prepared.
- Keep up with developments in the field through reading about current events, advocacy efforts/campaigns and so forth.
- Know everything on your resume and cover letter and be prepared to talk about them in detail. Know dates of employment and the substance of the work you did. Be prepared to explain gaps. Be prepared to talk about issues related to your resume, such as current events related to the work you did.
- Identify 2-3 things that you want the interviewer to know about you and think of various ways you can incorporate them in your answers or questions.
- Prepare 2-4 questions to ask the employer. See below for more detail.
- Schedule a mock interview with SJI. These can be done on short notice, and via phone if necessary. In addition, go over potential interview questions (see below) with friends - or on your own in the shower or in front of a mirror. PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE. You don't want to sound too rehearsed - but you want to sound prepared and confident in your answers.
- Alert references so they expect to be contacted after the interview.
- Prepare explanations for any inappropriate content that you have not deleted on your online profile/Facebook page. (Hopefully this is not an issue, and you have already deleted everything!)
- The night before: prepare a packet of materials to bring (resume, cover letter, writing sample, list of references, and transcript if applicable). Figure out how to get to the interview. Decide what you are going to wear (business attire is best, even though your interviewer may be dressed more casually). Get plenty of sleep.

THE INTERVIEW

Logistics: Get to the location early and go to a coffee shop to wait and organize your thoughts and relax. Be at least five minutes early to the office. Be polite to everyone at the organization. (At public interest organizations, the receptionist is as important as the legal director to your success.) Do not carry notes into the interview.

General interviewing tips: Be focused and concise - but make sure to give complete answers. It's OK to pause for a few seconds to prepare your answer. Try not to babble or fidget. Make sure to have direct eye contact (with everyone in the room if it's a
group interview). Be enthusiastic but professional. Read body language. If you don't understand a question, ask them to clarify it. Don't get ruffled if they are silent or rude or ask hard questions. If they ask offensive questions, you do not have to answer them – just explain that you are not prepared to answer questions you find offensive or inappropriate. Try to avoid annoying speech patterns (like saying “you know” at the end of every sentence) or nervous laughter. Try to weave in important relevant points. Be engaged and interesting. Do not take notes or refer to notes during the interview.

**Phone interviews:** In general, you should try to avoid phone interviews if possible. However, many public interest employers rely on these (especially for an initial screening) since they do not have funds for transportation costs. If you are doing a phone interview, make sure to be in a quiet location where no one will interrupt you. Do not rustle paper or make other noises that can be a distraction. Try to sound enthusiastic but focused. Try to read verbal cues, since you can’t read body language. Some students find it helpful to stand up during the phone interview, to maintain alertness and formality. If it is a group interview via telephone, try not to be frustrated if you cannot tell who is asking the question, or if the group has conversations amongst themselves.

**Skype interviews:** Occasionally an employer will want to do an interview via Skype. Make sure your Skype address is appropriate and working properly. Wear professional attire. Choose a location that is quiet and office-like (or at least not messy). Make sure the lighting does not cast shadows on your face. Look at the camera. Try not to get frustrated or distracted by the time lag, or by the interviewers’ off-screen conversations. Remember that everything you do can be seen on their screen — so the general interviewing tips above apply.

**COMMON AREAS OF QUESTIONING**

Obviously every organization will be different, but in general, public interest interviews often include the following subject areas:

**Questions Assessing Commitment to Issue Area.**

**Often the interview will start with questions such as:**
- “Why do you want to work here?”
- “Why do you want to work in this office as opposed to other offices that do similar work?”
- “What makes you a qualified candidate?”
- “How are you different from other applicants?”
- “Why did you come to law school?”
- “Which of our legal practice areas/areas of advocacy are you most interested in and why?”
THESE ARE THE HARDEST QUESTIONS TO ANSWER, BUT ARE USUALLY THE MOST IMPORTANT. YOU NEED TO ACE THESE. YOU NEED TO BE CONFIDENT AND THOUGHTFUL BUT NOT ARROGANT. LISTEN AS WELL AS SPEAK.

Questions About Your Resume.

These are designed to make the interviewee relax a bit, but don't let down your guard too much - you want to be accurate and careful about everything you say. Be prepared for questions that relate to the work the organization does, or about unusual things on your resume. The interviewer may also ask about things that happened after you left a previous job - e.g. developments in a case you worked on, or current events affecting the issue area you worked on. Also be prepared to eloquently and accurately discuss any writing (thesis, note, publication) that is mentioned on your resume. Be ready to explain gaps -- either gaps in the chronology of work experience, or other gaps (such as not participating in any activities in law school). If your resume lacks public interest experience, expect questions about why you are now interested in public interest issues. If you are switching from private sector to public interest, expect questions about that.

Listen for names mentioned at your prior employer or school that the interviewers know. They may be contacted about you whether or not you list them as references, so you should contact them after the interview to warn them.

Questions Assessing You as a Person.

The interviewer does not have much time to get to know you, so they are likely to ask some questions that may reveal what kind of person you are. These questions can include:

- "What do you like most/least about law school?"
- "What's your favorite class?"
- "Who is your hero?"
- "Describe a stressful situation at a job and how you handled it."
- "Describe your workstyle - are you a team player or do you work best independently?"
- "What is your biggest accomplishment?"
- "What are your strengths/weaknesses?"
- "How do you deal with pressure?"
- "Give an example of your on-the-job creativity."
- There may also be questions that pose scenarios and ask how you would deal with them (such as conflict with another attorney in the office) or ethical dilemmas (see below).
- There may be questions that probe how you feel about controversial topics related to their work (such as a public defender organization asking how you feel about representing alleged child abusers; or the ACLU asking how you feel when defense of the 1st amendment conflicts with other rights; or an environmental organization asking about your position on, and proposed legal response to,
global warming; or international justice mechanisms asking how you feel about accountability versus reconciliation).

- There may also be questions about the economic realities of being social justice lawyer, such as how you feel about making a very low wage or having little support staff or a low travel budget.

**Questions Assessing Your Legal Mind.**

The employer also wants insights into how you think like a lawyer, which can range from basic to difficult:

- "Tell me about your writing sample"
- "Tell me about a legal memo you wrote this year"
- "Tell me about a case that came up in one of your classes, explain the facts and holding, then tell me whether you agree or disagree with the legal reasoning"
- "Tell me about a thorny legal issue that relates to our work"
- "If you were a court, how would you rule on the following issue....""
- "What international legal norms would apply to the following scenario...."
- "Please answer the following hypothetical......" This is quite rare for summer job interviews and is more likely to occur in interviews for permanent positions - for example, at DA's offices or city law departments or impact litigation organizations. To prepare for this, have a basic familiarity with the main constitutional principles and statutes and cases that the organization focuses on. Remember there is not necessarily a “right” answer; more often, they want to hear how you approach legal or factual analysis, and whether you stand your ground when challenged.

**Questions Assessing Ethics.**

Certain legal organizations (like prosecutor’s offices and public defender’s offices) are quite concerned with a candidate’s ethical code, and will pose interview questions (usually hypotheticals) that test a candidate’s ability to weigh his/her obligations to the client or office against other concerns. Reviewing the state’s Code of Professional Responsibility can help prepare a candidate for these types of questions, although some questions will rely simply on the candidate’s judgment and ability to discern right from wrong.

**Your Questions for the Employer.**

As mentioned above, you should have 2-4 questions prepared for the interview. Be ready to ask them (and any follow up questions) at any point in the interview - not all interviewers wait until the end to ask if you have questions. You do not need to ask all your questions – but you want to prepare enough questions so that if the employer answers some of them during the course of your discussions, you are not left empty-handed. You should know everything on the organization’s website, so do not ask basic questions that make you look ill-informed.

**You can ask questions like:**

- How do you choose your cases/ projects/ clients/ priorities/ advocacy agenda/ communities served/ legal mechanisms?
• How do you staff your cases/projects/advocacy efforts?  Is the work done in
teams?  Does the same staff member stay with a project from start-to-finish?
• How does your organization work with others in the field?
• How do your different departments work together?  Is there coordination
amongst your various advocacy efforts?
• How have your priorities changed over time?  Why?
• Ask about specific legal issues or policies related to the work they do.
• Ask about the effects of a recent Supreme Court ruling (or federal or state court
ruling, or recent legislation, or a current event) on the work they do or on their
future agenda.
• Ask about the balance between litigation and policy work (or other advocacy
mechanisms that they employ).

These are just some examples, and may not fit the organization that you are
interviewing with; but they should give you an idea of the kinds of questions you should
be thinking about.  Questions about the summer program are fine if they haven't been
covered in the interview, such as:

• Does a summer intern work with one supervisor or multiple supervisors?
• How does a summer intern get assigned work?

Questions about supervision, training and expectations are fair questions, but make sure
to ask more probing questions as well, that show you've given a lot of thought to the
organization and their work.  (See examples above).  Make sure to ask about the
employer's hiring timeline if they don't mention it, so you know when to expect to hear
from them.  (This doesn't count as one of your 2-4 questions!)

YOUR QUESTIONS ARE VERY IMPORTANT AND WILL GIVE THE EMPLOYER GREAT INSIGHTS
INTO YOUR PREPAREDNESS FOR THE INTERVIEW, YOUR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE
ORGANIZATION AND YOUR COMMITMENT TO THE ISSUES.

Don't ask any questions about the organization’s finances, turnover rates, salaries, work
hours, vacation policies or internal politics – these can wait until after you have an offer.
Don't ask any questions that would indicate that you are not familiar with their work, like
“What kinds of cases do you work on?” or “What are some current cases you are
working on?” (You should know this from your preparation for the interview).  Also, be
careful with personal questions - while some interviewers might like to talk about
themselves, other interviewers would consider questions such as “Why did you come
work here?” or “What do you like and dislike about this job?” to be inappropriate
questions.

Other Questions You May Encounter.

• If you are applying to a city or geographic area where you don't have any ties,
expect questions about why you want to work in that region.
• If you worked in a different field prior to law, expect questions as to why you
want to switch fields.
• If you are a graduate who is currently employed, expect questions about why you want to leave your current job. (Do not be too critical of your current employer or reveal internal matters such as finances).
• If you are interviewing at an organization with a holistic approach, expect questions assessing your commitment to their approach, or experience with diverse communities, or interest in doing work that is not traditional lawyer-work.
• Although most public interest organizations care less about grades than other employers, you may encounter questions such as “What were your grades this semester?” or “Why did your grades decline this semester?”
• “Where else have you applied for a job?” is sometimes asked to assess your commitment to their issues.

Other questions you might be asked (more likely in an interview for a permanent position than for a summer job):

• “What do you think is the most pressing issue in our field today [such as international human rights, environment, civil rights, poverty law, etc.], and how would you resolve it?”
• “Do you think we should continue to emphasize our priority issues, or should we revamp our approach?”
• “We are finding that impact litigation is not succeeding given the current constitution of the courts; what new legal approaches should we adopt to address our issues?”
• “Most of our work is done with diverse communities. How are you prepared to work with clients/partners that are different from you?”
• “If you could restructure our agency/organization, how would you do it?”

Language.

• If you have indicated language ability on your resume, you may be interviewed in that language, or asked questions.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Thank you notes. Opinions vary as to whether or not you should send these, but our general advice is to send them (as long as you follow these guidelines!!) Email is best -- but assume the email will then be forwarded to everyone who participated in the interview(s). Either send one email addressed to all your interviewers (especially if it was a group interview); or if you send separate emails, make sure they are not form letters, and are catered to that specific interviewer (see the samples in this guide). Send the “thank you” within 24 hours of the interview. Make sure there are no typos or errors. Do not try to correct any mistakes you made at the interview. Refer to the discussions in the interview to personalize the “thank you” (so it is not a generic form letter). If something has come to your attention since the interview that you think will interest them (like a news article), you can attach it to the email, and mention it in the text. Maintain a professional relationship. Do not “friend” your interviewers, or invite them to join “Linked In”, or send photos or tweets.
**Following up.** If you have not heard from the employer within the time they specified that they would get back to you, make sure to follow up with them, via email or phone call. (If they weren’t sure when they would get back to you, feel free to contact them in two weeks if you haven’t heard anything). If information relevant to your application becomes available after the interview, be sure to follow up and send it. If you receive another offer, contact the organization immediately, explain the situation, and ask when they will make a decision on your application.

Let your references know when you get a job. It will make them pleased to have helped you. Letting them know how the job is going a month or two after it starts is another way of rewarding them and keeping in touch.