**Frequently Asked Questions about Judicial Clerkships**

**What does a Judicial Clerk do?** Judicial clerks conduct research, perform analysis, draft memoranda and perhaps documents of record (orders, jury instructions, or opinions), edit drafts, and take notes at hearings and in chambers meetings. The role of the judicial clerk varies by court, with appellate court clerks focusing their time intensively on writing and research while trial court clerks often focus on time-sensitive and litigation-related tasks.

**I have heard that a Clerkship makes a nice addition to a resume. Why?** Many legal employers, including law firms and government honors programs, seek to employ lawyers who completed a judicial clerkship. Judicial clerks have undergone a rigorous application process, demonstrating their strong research and writing skills as well as their academic talents. Most have developed strong working relationships with their judge(s) and court personnel. They gained insight into a judge’s decision-making and thought process, providing value in the employer’s future interactions with the court(s).

**What is a Judicial Clerk’s salary?** Federal clerks are hired under grade 11 of the Judiciary Salary Plan (JSP), approximately $50,000 per year. This salary is adjusted for cost of living differences in some metropolitan areas, including Richmond (roughly $58,000) and Washington, D.C. (roughly $62,000). Clerks also receive benefits, including health insurance.

State clerk salaries vary by state and locality. Supreme Court of Virginia clerk salaries are approximately $68,000, Court of Appeals of Virginia salaries are approximately $66,000, and circuit court salaries vary widely (from approximately $30,000 to $50,000). Most state clerks are eligible to receive benefits, including health insurance.

**Do I need to be in the top of my class to attain a Clerkship?** While judges look closely at academic performance, there are numerous variables judges consider, including writing ability and prior judicial extern/internship experience. Over the past several years, we have had students with GPAs 3.4 and above attain federal clerkships and 3.0 and above attain state clerkships. A strong GPA is no guarantee you will receive a clerkship, just as an average GPA is no indication that you will not receive a clerkship.

**What do Judges look for in successful Clerkship applications?** Most judges look closely at students’ academic records, writing experience, research abilities, and letters of recommendation. Participation in a journal, moot court involvement, prior judicial externship experience, and research work with a professor can enhance your application.

**What do I include in my application to a Judge?** You should review the judge or court’s posting to verify the specific application requirements.

Most federal judges request a resume, cover letter, law school transcript, 10-15 page writing sample, and three letters of recommendation. Some federal judges also require a college transcript. Some federal judges specify that two letters of recommendation should come from professors and one letter should come from an employer.

Most state appellate courts request the same materials requested by federal judges. Most state trial courts request a resume, cover letter, and law school transcript. Some state trial courts will also request a writing sample and either letters of recommendation or references.
Who should I ask to serve as Recommenders? You should ask three individuals to write letters of recommendation or to serve as references (depending on whether you are applying for federal or state clerkships and based on the particular court/judge’s requirements). You may ask faculty, employers, or other individuals. The best Recommenders will know you well enough to describe your intellectual abilities, research and writing skills, and personal characteristics. If possible, make your request in person. Follow up with a thank you note/email, enclosing your resume and optionally your transcript and a writing sample. Make certain your Recommenders know why you are interested in clerking and what you hope to gain from the experience. Stay in close contact with your Recommenders and, when appropriate, seek their advice on which courts and judges to target for applications. Refer to the document *Obtaining Good Judicial Clerkship Recommendations*, available on this website, for tips.

To how many Judges or Courts should I apply? There is no magic number of judges or courts to which you should apply. Judicial clerkships are highly competitive, so apply as widely as you are able. If applying at the federal level, apply to as many geographic locations as you have ties and/or interest. In addition to federal district or appellate judges, consider applying to magistrate and bankruptcy judges. If applying at the state level, you will gain the most value from clerking where you wish to practice. Consider state appellate, intermediate appellate, and trial courts.

Should I apply to both Federal and State courts? Consider your long-term objectives. If your goal is to join a large national law firm, you will gain the most value from a federal clerkship experience. If you wish to be a prosecutor, you may gain the most benefit from a state trial court clerkship. If interested in general practice in a small- to mid-size firm, both federal and state clerkships could be valuable. Seek the advice of professors and mentors, as well as Richmond Law alumni, regarding how to target your applications.

Are there any Courts which receive fewer applications & to which it makes sense strategically to apply? There are a number of specialty courts as well as courts located in remote areas which receive fewer applicants than the average court. Check with the Career Development Office for more information about these “off the beaten path” courts.

I have not secured my summer internship. Are there particular summer experiences judges prefer? As you apply for summer positions, consider the level of writing and research you will be able to contribute. As just two examples, working as a judicial extern or a professor’s research assistant can prepare you to assume the duties of a judicial clerk while also securing great references. Many judges do not post externship opportunities, so you must take the initiative to seek out the opportunity.

When do I apply for Clerkships? Typically, state clerkships are posted in late summer, with August and September application deadlines in the 3L year. However, deadlines vary widely, from as early as July to as late as March.

Many federal judges follow the Federal Law Clerk Hiring Plan. These judges agree not to review 3L applicants’ materials until after Labor Day. Other judges prefer not to wait until Labor Day; if you are interested in a Federal Judge whose clerkship application deadline is unclear, you must research further to determine whether he follows the Plan. Judges who do not follow the Plan may prefer to receive materials in early summer, necessitating the early preparation of recommendation letters and other materials. Check the website for updates on individuals judges’ hiring schedules.