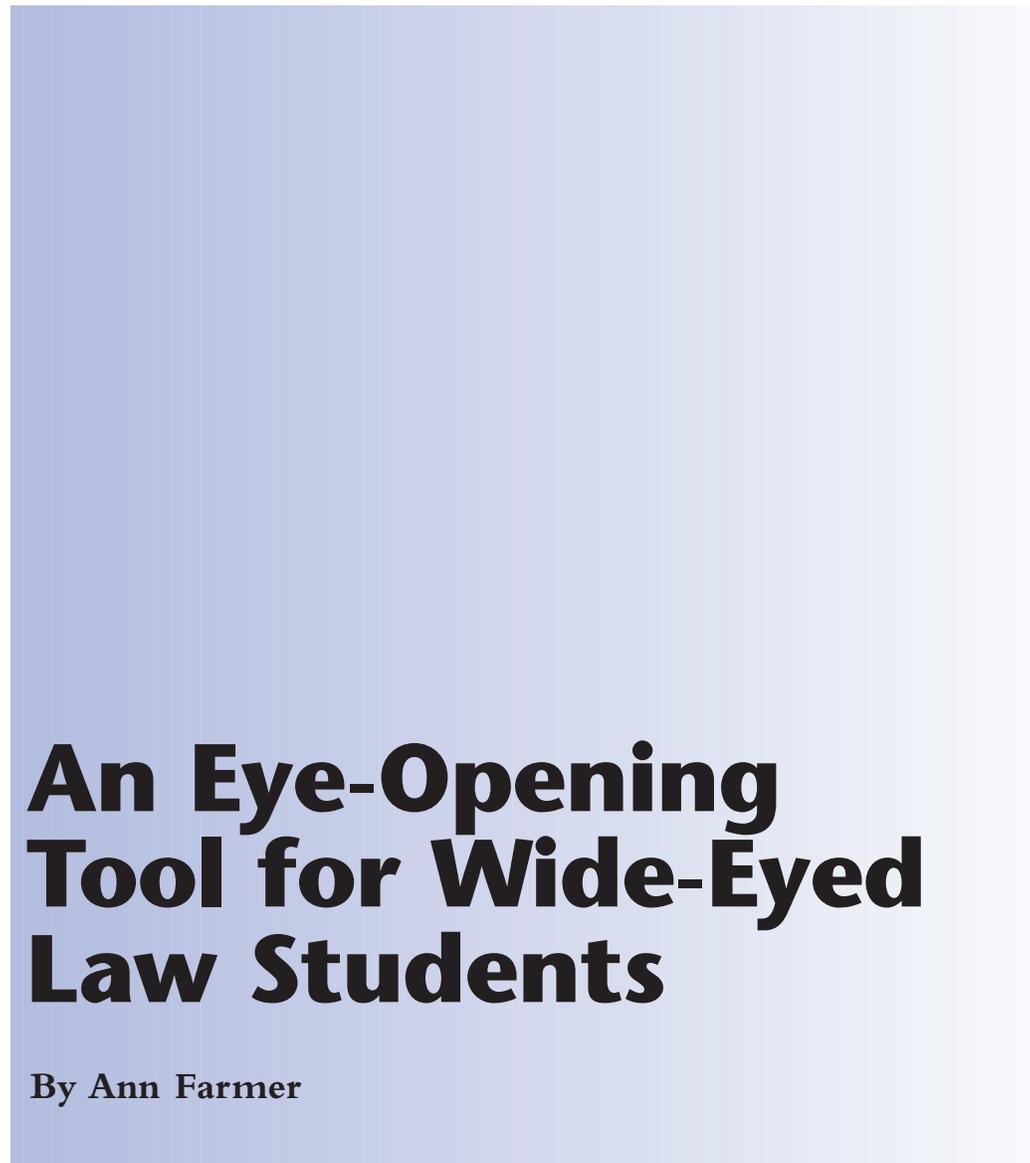


Law students who desire a career in the public service sector often seem at a disadvantage to those aiming for private practice work. For one thing, it's tough paying today's hefty law school loans with altruism. Because a larger number of students enter the private practice arena, law schools also tend to cater more readily to their curriculum interests and career placement needs. However, a new Internet tool may level the playing field a bit.

Somewhat similar to the *U.S. News & World Report's* yearly rankings of law schools, Equal Justice Works, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit organization, in collaboration with Newsweek.com, recently published a free online resource for law school applicants, law students, and others. *The E-Guide to Public Service at America's Law Schools* (<http://ejwguide.newsweek.com>) provides a broad range of information about public interest programs and curricula at 117 U.S. law schools. Approximately one-third of all U.S. law schools (including some top-tier ones) opted out of being included, some citing a lack of resources to complete the survey and others stating their aversion to comparisons. But Equal Justice Works' Chief Executive Officer David Stern thinks that a little competition goes a long way in this instance.

"Schools feel enormous pressure to meet the *U.S. News & World Report* criteria," Stern says, explaining how law applicants often choose a school based on the *U.S. News* scorecard. Yet he notes that those rankings do not include the law school's public service offerings, such as clinics, pro bono programs, and student groups. The new *E-Guide* will help fill this void by providing more in-depth data (as opposed to rankings) regarding each school's commitment to public service. In turn, Stern says, "We know that putting the information out there about a school's public service programs will put more pressure on [schools] to devote more resources."



An Eye-Opening Tool for Wide-Eyed Law Students

By Ann Farmer

If so, it is likely that the female student body will reap the greater reward because women more frequently pursue judicial clerkships, academic and governmental jobs, and other public interest positions than do men. According to a new study, *Jobs & JD's: Employment and Salaries of New Law Graduates—Class of 2005*, published by the Association for Legal Career Professionals (NALP), 6.4 percent of the female law graduates took jobs in public interest work compared with 3.3 percent of the males. Stern says he doesn't have a clear answer about why more women than men take public interest jobs, but he often

asks that question of others. "Some say women have better hearts and are more compassionate," he notes, pointing out that such statistics are consistent with the larger human needs/services sector in general.

At the same time, the total number of students entering the public service sector after law school has remained fairly flat since the early 1980s. They continue to comprise approximately 27 percent of law school graduates even as a couple of new trends have emerged during the last decade. One is that law schools are providing more specialized public interest career counseling. "Law

schools increasingly recognize the need to help students develop viable public sector career paths,” says Steven Grumm, director of public service initiatives at NALP. He believes that this initiative has grown largely in response to the financial pressures students face today. “Many are coming out with six-figure debt loans,” Grumm adds.

While students entering the private sector often receive plum job offers months ahead of graduation, students desiring a public sector job usually face lower-paying job prospects and fewer available positions. Also, the public sector encompasses a broad—sometimes mind-boggling—array of possible career directions, including nonprofit organizations, government agencies, international public service organizations, and academia. Schools are increasingly hiring advisors with experience in these varying fields to assist students who are clamoring for help in narrowing their career interests.

One way that the Office of Public Interest and Community Service at Georgetown University Law Center has beefed up its career counseling is by creating an alumni network program for which it solicits public interest graduates to return to campus and speak candidly to students about what they do and to serve as informal mentors. The public interest office also offers a fall semester series featuring representatives from government agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Justice, talking about their programs.

“It’s very important to go into the field knowing what public interest work entails,” says Georgetown Law’s Assistant Dean Barbara Moulton, adding that the more successful students tend to gain firsthand experience in school prior to entering the job market, primarily through clinical work, pro bono, externships, and internships with nonprofit and government organizations. “Get your foot in the door in your area of interest,” Moulton says,

explaining that Georgetown operates 14 clinics in which students provide legal representation for underrepresented individuals and organizations in cases involving political asylum, domestic violence, and environmental issues, etc.

But even law graduates who take a public sector job where they seem likely to flourish are faced with the problem of paying back their school loans. Private practice salaries continue to go up, but public sector salaries

The *E-Guide* allows users to contrast law schools on debt relief availability and pro bono requirements.

are decreasing over time when adjusted for inflation. “The disparity in salaries is even greater today,” says James Leipold, executive director of NALP. “Public sector salaries haven’t gone up commensurate to the increase in college law school tuition.”

As a result, another recent trend is that schools show an increased awareness in the need for loan repayment assistance programs (LRAPS), which are created by schools, state bar associations, and state legislatures. Equal Justice Works reports that more than 80 law schools currently offer loan repayment assistance programs, up from the 65 schools reported by the ABA Law Student Division in 2004.

Even so, the prospect of large debt and other factors can deter altruism. “A lot of students come to law school to do good, [but they] get off course,” says Stern, who believes that student groups and organizations provide vital support for students. “Groups are the watering hole for those interested in public service,” he says, suggesting that requisite pro

bono work also can inculcate students, who might not be on a public sector career track, with the desire to engage in some degree of public service opportunities during their career. “I believe there is nothing more life changing or that instills public service values more than a real-life, face-to-face experience with a client,” Stern says.

The new *E-Guide* allows users to contrast the participating law schools on such matters as debt relief availability and pro bono requirements. For instance, Columbia University School of Law in New York City is listed as one of nine schools that require all its students to fulfill mandatory pro bono hours. It also ranks high in the category listing the number of 2004–05 students that received debt relief.

One of Columbia Law’s 2006 graduates, Laila Hlass, describes how the school awarded her a public interest fellowship upon entering the school. The fellowship allowed her to partake in two summer internships doing impact litigation and spend a year working in a direct legal services clinic where she discovered her zeal for working with people. Columbia will continue to pay Hlass’s school loans for as long as she works in public service.

What she couldn’t anticipate was the outpouring of school support after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita wreaked havoc on her Long Beach, Mississippi, hometown. Hlass responded to the crisis by helping found the Student Hurricane Network (SHN), a nationwide network of law students dedicated to Gulf Coast legal and other relief work. “Columbia has been really supportive with this effort,” Hlass says, explaining how the Columbia student senate, student groups, and administration provided more than \$40,000 for relief work and SHN projects. What’s more, school administrators also provided advice, funding contacts, speaking engagements, and

storage space for school supplies they'd collected for Louisiana children. "A couple of administrators even took off time from work and went on pro bono trips over spring break with our students," she notes.

Hlass says her involvement with SHN proved significant to her educational development. "I have learned an incredible amount about national organizing, managing large numbers of people and projects, fundraising, and programming," she says. "I have also built some amazing relationships with law students who I know I will work with again sometime down the road as lawyers."

Stern points out that it's important for public service law school applicants to know about these types of student-based community service initiatives and everything else about a school's commitment to public service before making decisions about where to attend. He hopes that over time every law school in the United States will eventually be highlighted in the *E-Guide*, thereby boosting the importance that schools, students, and society place on public service. "Our dream," Stern says, "is to create a world where every lawyer says, 'Yes, I have something to contribute in terms of time or money to make this a more just society.'" 

[*Editor's Note: For helpful Web sites and tips for landing a federal government job, go to www.abanet.org/women/perspectives/articles.html.]*

Ann Farmer is a freelance journalist who lives in New York City. She works as a breaking news reporter for the New York Times and writes about television, law, dance, women's issues, and other topics for EMMY Magazine, Court TV, Dance Magazine, Women's eNews, and others.