What You Need to Know about Law Professorships

If you’re an attorney or you’re in law school, one career avenue you may have considered is becoming a law professor. After all, going into academic work is less fast-paced than trial attorney work (and many other specialties) and offers you the ability to teach the next generation of attorneys through your own knowledge and experience. Unfortunately, there’s not a lot of information out there on law professor jobs, and some of what is out there may be contradictory. Here’s some basic information, then, that will help you decide, based on job requirements and work environments, whether or not you want to become a law professor.

Is the School Important?

General wisdom has it that if you’re interested in becoming a law professor, the school you attend can be very important. After all, Yale Law School leads by a significant margin in the production of new teaching candidates, and after Yale come Harvard and Stanford. Schools definitely do pay attention to where you received your degree. However, that’s not the only factor.

If you didn’t attend a top school, you can’t use your grades as an indicator of your intellectual prowess, but that doesn’t mean that other methods can’t be used. Twenty-five years ago, most law schools looked to standardized measures of academic achievement, including prestigious clerkships, membership on the school’s law review, and very high grades, but these have long since stopped being the only factors that are used in considering candidates.

That’s because law schools realized that merely having good grades doesn’t indicate whether or not a candidate will produce quality scholarship as a law professor. Practical legal experience is not necessarily an indicator of scholarly skill, either — in fact, some schools even look down on it, which can make coming in from private practice difficult. Many younger law professors lack significant practical experience entirely.

The most common credential preferred by law school hiring committees today is a graduate degree in a related field. These degrees can vary from political science and economics to psychology and English. The important thing is that candidates have one — about a quarter of entry-level law professor jobs in recent years have been filled by people with PhDs. A significant number of the remaining jobs were filled by those with master’s degrees. While it’s not necessary to have such a degree — only a little less than half of the professors hired have one — it can be helpful if you don’t have more conventional measures by which to attest your skill.

Scholarship and Preparation
Since scholarship is the most important part of a law professor job, with teaching coming in second, it’s important to be able to prove to a hiring committee that you have the skills for it. While still a student, take time to read as much of the scholarship coming from younger professors as possible — consider joining a reading group. In addition, it’s important to write.

While publishable writing is a big component of your hireability as a law professor candidate, finished scholarship isn’t as important as doing the writing in the first place. This is because law schools are aware that your publication status is mostly determined by law journals, which are run by students who may not be the best judges of scholarly work. Start by writing two- to three-page idea summaries, take advantage of summer writing fellowships, and write reaction papers to seminars to build your writing portfolio.

Writing and scholarship continue after you graduate, too. Think about setting two to four years aside afterward to prepare for being a professor. Read scholarly articles and write a few that can be presented at a job talk. Since most students haven’t the time to do this during school, it’s vital to take time after graduation to do so.

Perseverance Is Key

Getting a law professor job isn’t easy — it’s a long hard road that takes a lot of work and commitment. In fact, your commitment to the process is one of the key pieces of becoming a law professor in the end. Almost every law professor candidate will encounter lots of uncertainty throughout the process. Persistence is important, no matter where you went to school. There’s a good chance you won’t make law review, place your article where you want it, get the clerkship you were looking for, or any number of other problems. Some lucky people are very successful at all stages, but most people will encounter difficulties.

Many well-qualified candidates don’t get a teaching position, or even an adjunct professor job the first time they apply. They may have to go on the market again to get a job. There’s a wide gap between the success rates of people who are really committed to the process of getting a teaching job and those who aren’t. Some people only want a job if they can get it in a specific location, or if they can be employed by a top school. These kinds of caveats mean they’re likely to give up early. Being willing to write a great deal, work hard, and be flexible are important qualifications for getting law professor jobs.

Is Adjunct Work Worth It?

Adjunct law professor jobs are held by people who work in academia while also acting as consultants or being part of a firm. This lacks the prestige of being a full-time professor, but can allow greater income opportunities, and may be a good way to get the experience and reputation for a full-time position later. The demand for adjunct professor jobs is rising, making it easier to get positions of this type.

However, a school that uses adjunct professor jobs more than it uses full-time law professors can be of low quality. So, it could be damaging to your reputation if you’re employed at such a school. What’s more, being in adjunct professor jobs can take up a lot of time, so weigh the costs and benefits carefully.

What to Expect out of Law Professor Jobs

Law professor jobs offer less monetary compensation than being an associate or partner in a law firm. In general, salaries are similar to those of associates, with lower end professors making around $50,000 per year, and higher salaries rising to $300,000 or more. There are also unusual cases, such as the $600,000 offered by Yale for a top corporate law professor, but much lower salaries are the norm. Those looking primarily for a high salary may be disappointed by law professor jobs. On the other hand, those interested in a low-structure work environment, with the ability to engage in plenty of scholarship, may find the lower compensation not to be a problem.

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