The 2011 clerkship season is upon us. Whether this is your first or sixth season as a clerkship advisor, each year poses new challenges and an opportunity to learn something new. This article identifies some research tips to assist applicants as they tailor their searches to suit long-term interests and career goals.

Self-Assessment

First, applicants should carefully consider what they hope to achieve during a clerkship. Some may wish to develop their legal research and writing skills, others might want to expand their knowledge of a particular subject area, and still others will hope to explore a local legal community and establish roots in a new location. Being aware of long-term interests will enable applicants to adapt their research to find opportunities that fit into, and support, their long-term career goals.

Developing an Intelligently Tailored Search: Specialty Courts

If candidates can identify a particular practice area of interest, advisors can help candidates to tailor their searches to find a clerkship that suits their long-term goals by locating courts, and even judges, that hear a high number of cases in that area. A tailored investigation can be time-consuming, but it enables candidates to focus their efforts and use their time efficiently. It will also result in “good fit” applications that will appeal to judges who want to cut to the chase and interview only those students with a genuine interest in the kind of work they do. A candidate qualified for a particular vacancy submits a more competitive application, reveals an enthusiasm that is not manufactured, and demonstrates a desire to learn all that a judge has to offer.

For candidates interested in highly specialized legal areas, some courts may be safer bets than others. For example, U.S. Bankruptcy Courts are great options for candidates interested in tax, commercial, or consumer law. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces, which reviews court-martial convictions, may appeal to those interested in practicing in the military. For those with a technical background, an advanced science degree, or an interest in intellectual property and patent law, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, which hears a lot of IP cases, would be a great place to launch a legal career.

Other specialty courts to consider are the U.S. Tax Court, U.S. Court of International Trade (which has exclusive national jurisdiction over international trade and customs issues), U.S. Court of Vet-
eral Appeals (jurisdiction over appeals involving benefits), and the U.S. Court of Federal Claims (jurisdiction over claims against the U.S., including claims for money damages and disputes over federal contracts). Some states have specialty courts too (e.g., Delaware’s Court of Chancery, which has a national reputation for developing case law on corporate matters and the Tax Court of New Jersey.)

More than 30 federal departments and agencies utilize Administrative Law Judges (ALJs) to conduct formal hearings and to issue decisions. Among those federal agencies with ALJs are the National Labor Relations Board, the Federal Trade Commission, the U.S. Department of Labor, the Food and Drug Administration, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Small Business Administration, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Some ALJs hire law clerks, usually for one- or two-year terms. The Federal Administrative Law Judges Conference website (www.faljc.org) offers resources, including an agency list with contact information for the Chief Administrative Law Judge. Some state administrative agencies also have ALJs.

**Print and Online Resources**

Applicants should review at least some of the following resources, each of which provides helpful information:

- **The BNA Directory of State and Federal Courts, Judges and Clerks** provides vital information about each court’s structure and jurisdiction, contact information for judges, and federal and state court websites.
- **The American Bench** provides judicial biographies and court profiles, both of which can alert students to the kind of work they will be doing during a clerkship.
- **The Almanac of the Federal Judiciary**, available through Westlaw, contains judges’ academic and professional information, noteworthy opinions, and commentary by practitioners including their reputation for demeanor, knowledge, and management style.
- **The History of the Federal Judiciary**, a web resource of the Federal Judicial Center, contains a useful Biographical Database to locate federal judges by court, gender, racial or ethnic background, nominating President, etc.

Courtlink, another online resource, offers clerkship applicants a unique and helpful research tool. To access this database, log into Lexis/Nexis and enter the Research System. Use the first tab option (Search-by-Source), select Find a Source under Option 2, type “courtlink” and select Litigant, Attorney, & Judge Strategic Profiles, which is Courtlink. Three main search components assist candidates who want to focus their job searches on a specific legal specialty.

1. **Nature of Suit** — provides data on the number of cases filed in a particular type of suit by a court. In Courtlink, use the “Nature of Suit” tab and search all district courts. Selecting “Patent” as the type of suit reveals the three courts with the highest number of patent cases — the Eastern District of Texas and the Central and Northern Districts of California. Not surprisingly, the 9th Circuit has the most patent cases of the Circuit Courts. While you can compare up to three district courts at a time, searches for circuit and state courts must be done one at a time. The pull-down menu for types of cases is fairly extensive.

2. **Court Profile** — shows the number and nature of cases a court hears. Select the “Court” tab under “Strategic Profile” and choose a particular court. Unfortunately, only one court can be searched at a time. This feature permits candidates to target their applications to courts handling the greatest number of cases in legal areas that interest them — as well as letting them know which courts they might want to avoid.
3. **Judicial Profile** — produces a search that breaks down cases by nature of suit for a particular judge. Select the “Judicial” tab under “Strategic Profile” and enter a judge’s name. The profile will note the nature of the cases the judge hears, the number of each one filed in any given year, the attorneys and firms appearing before that judge, the judge’s case count by judgment (number of cases favoring plaintiffs or defendants), and a trend analysis by case count and type. The smart applicant will identify judges with the highest number of cases in areas that appeal most to him or her and apply to those judges for clerkships.

Westlaw offers Profiles of Attorneys and Judges via *Profiler-WLD*. This directory connects primary and secondary research materials to people. A search for United States Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, for example, produces a biography, links to every opinion with which she has been involved, and Litigation History and Judicial Reversal Reports.

The objective of an intelligently tailored investigation is to maximize a candidate’s ability to secure a professionally and personally satisfying clerkship. A candidate’s application decisions rest on a variety of factors: court, prestige, location, connection to a judge, and a judge’s ideology, reputation, or demographics. Reviewing a judge’s opinions provides insight into his or her cases, writing style, and philosophy; this type of research usually precedes an interview but can be helpful at earlier stages of the application process as well. In the end, candidates should do their best to find a good fit and not apply to a judge for whom they have no interest in working. With consideration, planning, and focused research skills, candidates can boost their legal careers with a clerkship that furthers their individual long-term interests.

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