How to Get a Job in Legal Academia

Michigan Law graduates can be found in virtually every law school in the country; and many of our alumni teach at law schools overseas as well. Michigan is known nationally and internationally for being among the small handful of law schools producing the vast majority of law academics. Recent graduates have accepted positions at NYU, University of California-Davis, University of Chicago, and Emory, to name just a few. Our graduates are represented on the faculties of the very top law schools in the country.

Is Being a Law Professor the Right Job for You?

Being a law professor can be a wonderful career. Your three years in law school provide the perfect opportunity for you to determine whether being a law professor is right for you. While in law school, you will discover which legal areas interest you and whether you enjoy legal research and writing. Keep in mind that you see your professors in class, and may wrongly assume that teaching is the core function for a law professor. While teaching certainly is an important one, those interested in pursuing an academic teaching job would be well advised to understand that professors -- and in particular professors early in their careers -- spend the majority of their time on scholarship, i.e. researching and writing on fundamental issues of law and legal institutions. Thus, if you do not enjoy researching and writing, then being a law professor is not the right choice for you.

Rather than just observe your professors in class, try to become a research assistant to experience in depth the kind of work that they do. In addition, take every opportunity available to develop further your research and writing skills, and try to publish an article. As noted below, this is one of the best ways to position yourself for success in the law teaching job market.

What UMLS Will Do to Help You Become a Law Professor

Michigan Law’s graduates teaching in law schools throughout the country and abroad afford a rich networking resource for other graduates interested in pursuing this career path. In addition, every year, the Dean appoints a faculty member as the Faculty Advisor to promote UMLS alumni in pursuit of teaching positions. The Faculty Advisor will review the candidate’s CV, advise on the Association of American Law Schools (AALS) hiring conference, and advocate on your behalf.

The Office of Career Planning provides additional support. OCP counselors are available to review your application material and provide advice to those interested in legal academia. OCP sponsors panels throughout the year on the variety of teaching jobs available, including tenured-track professorships, clinical positions, legal research and writing, and adjunct or visiting opportunities.

1. Develop Relations with Professors. Taking seminar courses or paper-writing courses will give you a better chance to get to know your professors and a chance for them to learn about your writing skills and your academic potential. These courses will also give you the chance to develop the skills you will need for teaching -- legal research and writing articles. You should take full advantage of every writing opportunity while in law school.
Not all professors will be equally effective in making recommendations. In general, professors that are known by faculty at other schools will be able to give more powerful recommendations. Thus, the most authoritative recommenders will be:

\[
\text{professors who are known because they are famous, write a lot, attend many conferences; or professors that have come to Michigan laterally and thus have taught at other schools where you might wish to teach. Also, visiting professors you had here who may be able to help you at their home faculty can be useful.}
\]

Maintain your ties with the professors you get to know well. Then, when you are ready to go on the job market, by all means get in touch with all professors who know you and think well of you.

2. **Attend Workshops and Lectures.** It is useful to attend as many workshops and lectures as possible at this law school or, after you graduate, at other law schools. This will provide you with an insight into the culture and thinking of an academic world and will better enable you to anticipate the questions that you may be asked in an interview.

3. **When to Go on the Market.** Most people go on the academic job market within the first few years after graduating from law school. After you have been out of law school more than 5 or 6 years, it begins to get more difficult to get a tenure track job because hiring committees may doubt that you are serious about your academic agenda (in contrast, it may become easier to get a clinical teaching job if you have more practice experience). Try to plan about two years ahead before you start teaching (though less time can also work) -- one year to put your writing together, perhaps to teach as an adjunct, hone the resume, strategize with your recommenders, and then one year to be on the market and make the switch.

4. **What You Can Do in Advance to Increase Your Chances.** The steps detailed below are not the only route -- just the safest, most-traveled one:

   **A. The Traditional Resume.** Traditionally, law schools look for applicants that:
   - Attended an elite school
   - Have an advanced degree
   - Had been an officer on the law review
   - Made exceedingly high grades
   - Clerked for an elite circuit judge (2nd or D.C. Circuit) or the Supreme Court
   - Have highly-respected recommenders actively promoting the candidate

   **B. Have a Clear Research Agenda.** There are two alternative attributes or so-called “plus factors” that are increasingly valued on the market: having published legal scholarship in well respected journals and having a Ph.D. in an ancillary field of study. The most important factor is having already produced some scholarly work. Michigan has placed many people in teaching jobs in the past few years. Most of these people were not in the
top 10% of their class, but almost all of them had published articles. Indeed, one reason that Ph.D. applicants may seem to have an advantage in the hiring process is that they have significant writing experience in writing their dissertation, and that fact increases the schools’ confidence that they will be able to continue writing.

C. Teaching Less Central. It is difficult to overemphasize how much law schools are looking for applicants who will write scholarly legal articles. Teaching is often not even mentioned in the hiring process. Law schools want to hire entry-level professors who can write scholarly legal articles right away. The traditional criteria for hiring --good grades and prestigious clerkships -are not a good predictor of a person’s ability to produce good written scholarship. Therefore, many law schools refuse to hire people, even those first in their class with a Supreme Court clerkship, if they have no written work. This is more likely to be the case the more prestigious the law school that is doing the hiring.

D. Other Steps to Take in Advance.

i. Develop Research Ideas: Take classes in which you will have the chance to write scholarly papers and get to know professors. As you take classes, start a file of ideas that might become articles.

ii. Write an Article (or two): If you want to start teaching in the fall of Year 3, you would go on the market in the fall of Year 2. What you can do in the fall of Year 1 is to draft one article and one book review. Since you must give a job talk anyway, you could take some extra effort to publish your job talk as an article. Having a piece on which your job talk is based and accepted for publication in the midst of the hiring process can give you a boost.

iii. Write a Book Review: Law Reviews usually solicit book reviews from professors, but professors are notorious for failing to turn in their reviews or for doing less than a bang-up job. If you pick out a book on a hot topic or an important professor and submit a review to a flock of good law reviews, there is a good chance that any given moment there may be journals that need or could use book reviews. Some of our students have succeeded in publishing book reviews because of this shortage.

Book reviews are easy because they require less independent research or independent thinking than for an article. They count less than articles, but are much better than no publication.

iv. Teaching Fellowships: Some law schools offer one- or two-year fellowships. These will give you time to write and publish; and they can create additional contacts that will be helpful to obtaining a faculty position. These contacts can be helpful not only at the law school where you have the fellowship, but at law schools nationwide.
v. Visiting Professorship at a Law School: A visiting professorship provides the applicant with a greater understanding of the academic culture, and also allows the applicant to better decide whether an academic career is what he or she desires. The visiting professorships create more useful contacts for the applicant and can be a valuable credential to have when you go on the job market. An offer to visit at a law school often comes out of the interviewing process, and the applicant can weigh such offers against any offers of permanent employment he or she may have. A special kind of Visiting Professorship is available at NYU and at Northwestern. Both have programs in taxation, but also have them in other areas. Some of those programs will also provide a graduate degree in law.

vi. Additional Graduate Work: Graduate work is another vehicle that helps applicants obtain a teaching position. Graduate work in law can be important for foreign-trained lawyers. For domestically trained students, graduate work in law is usually aimed at a specific specialty such as taxation or labor law, and some law schools will give weight to an applicant having such a graduate degree in law. A graduate degree in another discipline, such as economics or political science, may also lend weight to your application.

E. Jobs Before Teaching. Law schools generally do not make distinctions among jobs after a clerkship. While there may still be some preference for elite law firms, federal government lawyers, and public interest impact litigation jobs, this variable is in flux. The one important exception is jobs in which applicants have acquired significant substantive knowledge that will be directly relevant to their teaching and writing (e.g., staff member at the Joint Committee on Taxation intending to concentrate in tax, prosecutor or public defender intending to concentrate in criminal justice).

It is difficult to switch into teaching after too many years in practice. If you haven’t made partner after six or seven years, law schools will worry that you are applying only because you weren’t going to make partner. If you have made partner, law schools will worry that you will have trouble starting to write academic articles after so many years in practice. Students often say they want to go into practice for a short time to pay off their loans, then go into teaching. But a word of caution is in order. First-year associate salaries are not that far above first-year teaching salaries in law schools. Salaries after five or six year in law firms are much higher than professor’s salaries, but, by that time, it may be more difficult to break into teaching.

4. The Basics.

A. Getting Prepared. If you plan to start teaching in September Year 3, you should start preparing in the fall of Year 1. The key items are: (1) have some writing underway that you can use as the basis for you interviews and job talk, (2) get in touch with faculty from law school who may be willing to recommend you, and (3) prepare your resume in July so it can be included in the August listing on the Internet and can go out in the first AALS mailing of hard copies.
B. Writing. As mentioned, the most useful calling card for getting a teaching job is to have published writing that you can show to hiring committees. You need to make time while in practice to write academic work that will show your scholarly agenda.

C. Recommenders. Having strong recommendations is vital. Hiring Committees tend to be much more attuned to recommendations from faculty than from judges or partners with whom you have practiced. While in practice, you should keep in touch with faculty who may one day end up recommending you for teaching jobs. They may well be the key to your success on the market.

D. AALS Resume. The Association of American Law Schools resume form is limited to one page. There is a fee for registering with the AALS. You should consider carefully how to present yourself to best advantage. Contact recommenders and faculty currently on the Hiring Committee and have them review your AALS resume before you file it to suggest ways that you may better highlight your strengths. It is important to be in the first AALS mailing at the end of the summer. Also, you should send out packages to 20-40 schools of particular interest to you with a brief cover letter, academic resume, and reprints of relevant articles. Academic resumes are more extensive than legal professional ones and stress honors, publications, works-in-progress, and invited talks.

E. Agenda/Interview/Job Talk. Each state of the hiring process has its pitfalls and opportunities. You should consider writing a 3-page agenda letter early in the process. It should discuss what your most recent articles argued, how you plan to extend those articles, and what you anticipate your scholarly agenda to be over the next few years. You might also indicate what the topics of your job talk will be. This letter can be quite useful in the initial interviews and in subsequent on-campus process. When you go to the job talk the most important advice is to moot your talk beforehand, preferably in front of law professors. You cannot put too much work into preparing a tight 20-minute talk.

F. Be Entrepreneurial. You will not get a job if you are passive in the hiring process. You should follow-up every contact you have in the law teaching world, seek out every potential ally, write every thank-you letter, and make every phone call. Having all the right credentials is not necessarily enough to get a job. Hussle and plain good luck are also required.

5. Other Options. Clinical, adjunct, or visiting law positions may also be available, but we concentrate on tenure-track positions in this material.