The Art of Writing Successful Applications for Public Interest Fellowships

NALP Annual Education Conference
Wednesday, April 19, 2017
11:30 a.m. – 12:45 p.m.
Hilton San Francisco Union Square
333 O'Farrell Street
San Francisco, CA 94102

Program Description: Writing applications that are selected for public interest fellowships requires very different skills than those used for traditional legal writing. Crafting a clear description of a compelling legal need, telling an effective story about both client issues and personal motivation for the work, constructing a realistic and comprehensive one or two year time line and/or business plan, and confidently conveying projected tangible outcomes are among the challenges that we will explore in detail to enable you to successfully coach students and alumni through this exciting process. We will also address counseling students writing more than one application for the same project to potential funding organizations with very different application formats, and how to write a public interest fellowship resume.

Learning Objectives:

This panel will provide specific information about how best to:

1. Composing statements of legal need that are clear and compelling.
2. Describing legal strategies and outcomes that are both concise and specific.
3. Incorporating supportive quantitative data selectively and effectively.
4. Preparedness & Competency: Writing a personal narrative that successfully communicates deep passion for and dedication to a particular cause and/or client base.
5. Crafting a cohesive overall personal narrative and "story line" in an application that flows and has a consistent and strong theme.
6. "Writing to the funder and the format" – Successfully "translating" one application for a specific project into a very different application format for another potential funder.
7. The cover letter as a fellowship application – How to use the description provided by the funding organization of the required/desired fellowship applicant qualifications as a step-by-step outline for a cover letter when the only materials requested for an application are a cover letter and a resume.
8. Resumes for fellowships – important considerations for writing a resume specifically for fellowship applications.

Six primary topics outlined in our learning objectives:

A. Nuts & Bolts of Writing an Application:
   1. Statements of Legal Need.
   2. Legal Strategies and Outcomes.
   3. Preparedness & Competency – the Personal Narrative
B. Stylistic Concerns:
   4. Translating an application from one fellowship format to another.
   5. The Cover Letter as a Fellowship Application.
C. Resume
   6. Writing Resumes for Fellowships.

A. Nuts & Bolts of Writing an Application: An Overview:

- It's not just about the legal work. Writing a fellowship application is very different from traditional legal writing. Requires a lot of input from various sources (professors, host organization, counselors, current and/or recent fellows). Sometimes advice can be conflicting. More often than not, the drafting process is far more intensive and involves many more rewrites than other writing projects.
- The best fellowship applications not only outline a clear and compelling legal advocacy project, but also clearly convey a compelling need for a particular population as well as a compelling passion for the work on the part of the student. These latter elements are very personal. For this reason, many students struggle with how to incorporate and effectively convey this type of information.
- Use the first person as often as possible. The fellowship review committees are not interested in work done by your supervisors, or by teams you worked on, as much as they are in the individual applicant's work/contributions.
- Write the obvious. Don't assume that connections (ex. between your experience and your project) will be made automatically by the readers.
- The personal elements of the application are often an unexpected challenge for students. Some students say this is the hardest part of writing an application.
- Skadden must be a coherent whole. Essays are one page – not 300 words. Evolution of essays is very fluid – material from one may end up in another essay.
- There must a strong story line in the application. A strong case for the project, first legally, but then personally as well.
- Be careful with EJW to account for formatting glitches, and do as much of the application on line before the final week to be sure you have no formatting issues and can meet word/character counts. This year it seems as though the character cut off was lenient.

1. Statements of Legal Need
   - Balance the overall issue with statistics that “quantify” the need
   - Statistics need to be selective. Some may be very specific – others may be more generalized
   - The written description must compel the reader to care.
   - Personal stories of working with a client can be effective in portraying legal needs that can then be generalized to a larger population. This method can “give a face” to demonstrate the personal impact of the legal need.
2. Legal Strategies and Outcomes Statements of Legal Need
   - Using an outline can be an effective way to summarize a multi-prong strategy.
   - Try to incorporate one or two key specifics (statistics, references to specific statutes, etc.) to demonstrate practical knowledge of existing law.
3. Preparedness & Competency – the Personal Narrative
   - A personal story again be an effective way to communicate the “what, where, how, and/or why” of a seminal event in the candidates life.
   - Needs to “develop” from a past seminal event through a thread of pre- and during-law school to show a progression to the present for this particular project.
   - Keep in mind the reader/evaluator’s perspective – what makes this candidate tick in a way that will make them a successful and effective advocate for these clients doing this project.

B. Stylistic Concerns:

1. Translating an application from one fellowship format to another.
2. The Cover Letter as a Fellowship Application.
   a. Using the description of the fellowship as a template for the content of the cover letter
   b. A two, three, or four page “cover letter” may not only be acceptable, but necessary

C. Resume:

1. Resume – throw out the one page rule. Include everything related to the project/work. If it goes back to high school, that’s OK. All volunteer and part-time as well as full-time paid is included.
2. Clinics in particular should be listed under “Experience” section and descriptions should be substantially fleshed out. Involvement in law student pro bono work – especially any leadership role(s) – should also be included in an “Experience” section vs. under “Education”
3. Depending on how much is included in the resume, you may need to categorize experience to “front-load” the most important information, while at the same time including (to cover time gaps) other information to make the resume complete.
4. Languages – encourage honesty but completeness. More often than not, students will under-sell their capability on the resume.
5. Publications and/or presentations at conferences – especially those related to the project proposal, are important to include.

(If we have time)

Getting the Best References:

1. Assess all possibilities to compare options and come up with the best combination. For example, the decision to use a particular professor for a reference may change the decision on which former employer to choose since one may provide information about skills that the other does not.
2. Must be substantial! (at least 2 to 3 pages) and provide a great deal of detail. Should address not only skills, but if possible, address the particular fellowship project proposal and link skills to this work.
3. In general, go with references that will speak to concrete skills related to the fellowship project.
4. If there is more than one professor option, consider which can most effectively speak to skills that are most related to the fellowship proposal. If there are two good options, maybe it's possible to include a quote from another professor related to a specific course or clinic or research project in the primary reference. The same could be true for an employer reference.
5. Students may offer to write a first draft of the reference to essentially translate their resume into letter prose format. This can save time for a professor/former employer and also assure that the information is presented with all important details.
6. Be sure to ask if the reference writer feels comfortable writing not only a positive, but a substantial/detailed reference letter specific to the fellowship proposal.
7. If it seems like the offer will be well received, offer to have the reference letter critiqued by advisors (counselors, professors) if helpful/acceptable.
8. For former employer/supervisor, weigh whether it should be staff attorney or executive director – which name will carry more weight. If the staff attorney can speak in greater detail about the specific skills and work of the applicant, perhaps they can include a quote from the executive director about a specific project the student worked on with her.
9. If a potential reference is an alumnus/a fellow of the particular program, consider the possibility of using another person for a "formal" reference, and then ask a current fellow and/or a fellowship alumnus/a to either call or write an e-mail to add to the application file.
10. Be sure to tap the "fellows network," especially alums of your school, for additional references – informal is fine. Be careful not to overstep (use Skadden example of partner attempting to lobby another partner on the selection committee).

Collaborating with Faculty and Alumni who have been Fellows, and Non-Alumni Fellows:

1. For faculty, identify best prospect(s), and specifically ask if they could help. Hopefully you will have at least one prospect to approach. If this is a new ask, it might be helpful to give an estimate to the professor of how much time will be involved and when the application is due.
2. Research your faculty to find former fellows among your ranks. You may be surprised to discover connections that you did not know. Often these fellowship alumnae/i will feel particularly invested in advancing students for the opportunities that they themselves had.
3. Clinical professors are often the best bets, but not the only options.
4. Specific help is most often needed to review/edit drafts of proposals. Some professors who are knowledgeable in the field of practice of the fellowship proposal may not be familiar with fellowships application processes per se. For these, it might be helpful for you to provide them with previous successful applications. If so, it's best to share at least two to demonstrate how each application is unique and different approaches can lead to success. If no alumni/ae have received the fellowship, don't be shy to ask fellows from other law schools to share their successful applications. They're mostly very happy to share
5. Try to make the connection between a professor mentor and a student applicant as early in the process as possible – even during the 2L spring. Professors may be helpful in coaching students through the exploratory research process and might direct them to good potential host organizations.
6. At Fordham, we now have a faculty committee for post-JD public interest fellowships that is a hugely helpful resource for our students.