

Should you be a faculty research assistant? A law professor explains why you should work as a research assistant, how to get the job, and how to do it well.

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If you've considered working as a research assistant for a professor at your law school, stop considering, and pursue it. If you haven't considered it, you should. Working as a faculty research assistant is one of the best jobs you can have while you are a student. Read on to find out why it's a good job, learn tips on how to find a job as a faculty research assistant, and get advice on how to be good at it.

Why It's a Good Job

Following are 10 reasons to look for a job as a research assistant.

1. It is a prestigious job. Yes, you can get a job clerking at a law firm. The hourly pay rate may even be a few bucks more than what you will earn as a faculty research assistant. Working as a faculty research assistant, however, is a job that has a special prestige. If you approach the faculty research position in the right way (as described in the last section of this article), you can have an experience that outshines almost any other job you can have while you are in law school.
2. Learn while you earn. You'll develop and hone advanced research skills that you'll use later in other jobs. Essentially, when you are a research assistant, you are being paid to improve your research skills. You'll pick up tips on effective research techniques. You'll learn about research sources that you might otherwise miss. You'll become good friends with the reference librarians at your school. And if you try your hand at writing memoranda about your research, you will develop stronger writing skills that will serve you well after you graduate.
3. Work on cutting-edge legal issues. Law professors--like other members of academia--must "publish or perish." Many professors think that perish is an underrated option (especially after they are tenured). But law professors who take their work seriously will usually publish books, articles, and other scholarly and professional writings on a regular basis. Some of their work will be on the most cutting-edge legal issues you can imagine. Your professor may be developing a new legal theory that courts, legislatures, and administrative agencies will later adopt and implement. You can have an important supporting role in helping a professor develop that shapes new directions in the law.
4. Get a great reference. You'll need strong references when you apply for clerkships, summer associate positions, and, indeed, almost any kind of legal employment. If you're a faculty research assistant, you can get a great letter of recommendation from the professor. But be careful--you shouldn't take a research assistant job just to get a letter of recommendation for your next job.
5. Benefit from your professor's Rolodex. You may not have a Rolodex, and if you do, it doesn't hold a candle to the one your professor has. Your professor's Rolodex, or an electronic version of one, stores a wealth of contact information for many important lawyers, judges, and business professionals. And if you do a good job for your professor, you can ask for specific recommendations on people you should contact for informational interviews and perhaps even jobs. You'll probably be introduced to some of these people your professor has met over the years.
6. Enjoy time off from work during exams. If you work in a law firm, you often may be asked to put in some extra hours because of a client emergency. The requests may come right before a paper is due or during exams. These emergencies are commonplace, and law firms aren't always lenient about your needs as a law student. If you are working as a faculty research assistant, your professor will know when your exams are and won't expect you to work during that time. Your professor wants you to do well academically. A law firm cannot tell a client with an emergency matter to wait for a month until you finish your exams.
7. Take better advantage of other activities at school. If you have to leave school to go to work at a law office on the other side of town, you may miss out on special opportunities at school. If you can spend more time at school, you can be more active in student organizations, attend presentations or other special events at the school, and simply spend more quality time at the school with your study group and other classmates. You will be spending lots of time at the office once you graduate, so take advantage of the opportunities at school while you can.
8. Keep your commute to work very short. When you go to class and work in the same building, you cut down on a lot of travel time. And if the weather is bad when it's time to go from one to the other, you don't even have to leave the building. The downside? If the weather is nice, you don't get to leave the building to go to work.

9. Gain practical experience. Some professors work on pro bono cases. For example, some of my research assistants got to assist on petitions for the U. S. Supreme Court. They met the client we were representing, a woman in the military who was suing her supervising officers for sexual harassment. The legal obstacle in the case was the Feres Doctrine, the rule that service members cannot sue the military for injuries they suffer while in military service. (If one could sue the military for injuries, countless tort actions for battle injuries would be brought against the military, and the fear of future tort liability would paralyze our armed forces.)

We argued that there should be an exception to the Feres Doctrine for intentional and deliberate sexual harassment because (1) the risk of sexual harassment by your commanding officer should not be part of what you sign up for when you volunteer to defend your country and (2) sexual harassment is prohibited by the military's own policies, and military supervisors should not be protected when they engage in specifically prohibited conduct. My research assistants helped me on petitions for the U.S. Supreme Court, which twice declined to hear the case. But my research assistants got firsthand practical experience on a very interesting case.

10. Find a lifelong mentor. The professor you work for may become a good friend and remain so for years after you graduate. I've had the pleasure of being lifelong friends with the professor I helped as a research assistant. He's given me advice in good times and bad, and I value the special mentor relationship that we've kept up now for more than two decades.

How to Get the Job

There are three ways to get a job as a research assistant.

1. Apply. If a professor advertises for a research assistant, apply for the job. You may be competing with other students, but if you don't apply, you have no chance of getting the job. Treat the application with the level of seriousness that you would for any other job. Look for postings in your career services office, and tell them that you are looking for a faculty research job so they will notify you when such a posting comes in from a faculty member.

2. Ask. If you admire the work that certain professors are doing, tell them. Ask if they need help. Ask if they need another research assistant. Tell them that you want to be their research assistant. Don't be afraid to ask professors more than once--the worst that can happen is that they'll say no.

If professors say that they already have a research assistant, remind them that they can have more than one. Most schools allow faculty members to have more than one research assistant. It makes them more productive and increases the quality and quantity of scholarship. It's also good for you that professors can have more than one research assistant because, if you are swamped doing a brief for moot court or a comment for a law review, your professor can rely on another research assistant during that time.

Suggesting a specific project also can get you hired as a faculty research assistant. Suggest a new edition of a book or an update of a law review. For example, approach a professor with a question like this: "Professor Wojcik, you wrote a book called Illinois Legal Research a couple of years ago. Do you need help on the second edition?" A question like that will usually be answered with a yes. But if the answer is no for the project you suggested, have some other suggestions ready as backup. If you make it clear that you are ready, willing, and able to work, it shouldn't be long until you get the job.

If the professor really can't hire you, you may be able to do an independent study with that professor. If other options fail, some students also volunteer to write articles with their professors as co-authors, and this option may be open to you.

The start of the school year is a great time to ask. A professor may have had research assistants who all graduated last spring. But any time of year can be a good time to ask. Why should you adopt this aggressive strategy? Because it works.

3. Network. Ask the professor to recommend you to colleagues. Sometimes professors don't need help. Maybe they are going off to teach as a visiting professor at another school. Maybe they are about to start a Fulbright grant teaching in another country. Or maybe they have 10 research assistants already. But all professors have colleagues, and they can ask their colleagues if they need help. If a faculty colleague recommends a student to me as a research assistant, I usually hire the person recommended.

How to Be a Good Faculty Research Assistant

Once you've gotten the job, how do you do it well? I asked several faculty colleagues around the country for their views on what makes a successful research assistant. Some of their views may surprise you, but most of the comments mirror what any employer would identify as the traits of their best employees. The names of those who provided their views are included at the end of this article.

1. Be reliable. If a professor gives you an assignment, the professor expects you to do it or to let him or her know (as soon as possible) that you are having trouble doing so. Two of the worst things you can do are to forget to do an assignment or to turn it in late without letting the professor know in advance. For many of my projects, if work is late it is of no use to me whatsoever. One colleague said that good research assistants are those "who do the work they've committed to do."

Some professors--when considering you for a research assistant--will consider how you conduct yourself at school. One professor said it this way: "I would not hire a student who had turned in late papers (unexcused) or was constantly late to class or absent without an excuse. I need someone that I can count on."

Reliability is key. When you are given a research assignment, ask how much time you have to work on it, and stick to that deadline or explain in advance of the deadline why you can't.

2. Communicate. If the professor sends you an e-mail message, answer it. If the professor asks you to stop by the office, stop by or phone if you can't come in person. Professors need to know whether you are available to do the work, and they need to know that you will work on an assignment they give you. Don't hide from the professor, just as you won't later hide from a law firm partner or a client. Communication is vital--even if all you can say is that you are still working on the project. Don't wait until the night before you promised to do the project to tell the professor that you haven't been able to work on it.

3. Be a self-starter. One professor wrote that the best research assistants are those that are self-starters. She is so swamped with work most of the time that she has to think twice before hiring a research assistant because managing even the best research assistants takes time. She said that the difference between a mediocre research assistant and a good one is usually marked by an ability to continue following a research "thread" with little or no input from the professor, once you have a solid grasp of the topic that you are researching. She described this characteristic as "independence." Other professors recognize that the nature of research itself leads to exploring new topics and theories.

4. Ask for help if you are lost One professor wrote that she looks for "students who ask questions when they're stumped instead of forging ahead." The same will be true later of your work in a law firm. Imagine that you are working for a partner but because you don't understand what you are working on you bill 20 hours on research that didn't need to be done. Will that time have to be written off, or will the client have to pay for unnecessary research? Ask for help if you are lost. Also, work closely with the reference librarians as you research you'll learn a lot from them, and they'll be happy to help you.

5. Don't try to take on too much. Professors often say that they are only looking for the best and brightest students to be their research assistants. But you don't have to be the best student in the class. In fact, it may be better if you're not. Many professors eventually find that "a B+ student who is motivated to improve can actually be a better choice." One professor wrote that she specifically is not looking for the star of the class, who may often be so busy doing other things that he or she won't be the greatest research assistant. One exception to this, however, is that you should have gotten a high grade in your research and writing class.

6. Spend a lot of time on campus. Professors look for students who enjoy being on campus and who are involved in one or more student organizations. Many professors often need last-minute help, and a student who is around is more likely to be able to pitch in without a lot of notice.

7. Be positive. Professors like to hire students who are fun to be with. One professor wrote that it is important to have a "constructive attitude." If you complain all the time, or if you have a lot of negative energy, the professor won't want to spend time and energy dealing with your issues.

8. Show good judgment One professor wrote that she looks only for good judgment in a research assistant. She said, "Everything else can be taught, if need be."

9. Be organized Several professors mentioned good organizational skills as very important. One expressed a preference for students who can create charts for various projects. Every employer values good organizational skills.

10. Be discreet One professor wrote that she looks for students with a sense of discretion. She said that she doesn't like for her research agenda to be the talk of the law school. Similarly, she said that she did not want to hear gossip about other professors or students. Keeping client confidence is likewise an important skill for lawyers.

11. Treat it like a real job. One professor wrote that she looks for students who will treat the research assistant position "like an actual job instead of an in-the-bag recommendation from a professor." Professors don't like having research assistants who are absent all semester and show up only when they need something. We have many important projects, and we need your help. That's why we hired you. Have good time management skills. Be responsible. Treat it like the real job it is.

If you do a good job as a faculty research assistant, your professor will likely help you for the rest of your professional career. It's a good deal. Take advantage of it.

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