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CAREERS

IN INTERNATIONAL LAW

A Guide to Career Paths in International Law

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The Many Pathways of International Legal Careers

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My career in international law has been exciting and ever-evolving. Today I am an associate professor of Law at the University of Colorado-Boulder Law School, specializing in international law and dispute resolution, but my path to this position has been anything but a straight line. After I graduated from Harvard Law School, I clerked for the Honorable Judge Raymond L. Finch of the U.S. District Court for the District of the Virgin Islands. Since then, I have practiced international law at the State Department; I have participated in negotiations at the United Nations in Geneva; I have argued before the Iran-U.S. Claims Tribunal in The Hague; I have mediated international and cross-cultural disputes; I have written scholarly articles; and I have taught courses.

My passion for international law arises from my belief that it plays an instrumental role in maintaining global peace and security through the promotion of international cooperation and the reduction of conflict. My entry into the field of international law began long before I became a lawyer. Early in my career, I became a mediator and developed a great appreciation for the power of conflict resolution. After college, I worked in government as a policy analyst at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and later at the U.S. Trade Representative's Office. Both placements afforded me opportunities to become involved in high-level assignments. Through hard work, supportive mentors and good fortune, I was able to participate in several international negotiations, including the *U.S. – Chile Free Trade Agreement* talks and the *UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties 6*. This exposure to international agreement formation piqued my interest in the intersection of international law and dispute resolution, which I continued to pursue during law school.

At Harvard I took classes from and worked with professors who specialized in international law, human rights and negotiation. Finding a job in these areas, however, was a much greater challenge. Taking a risk, I turned down an offer with the New York law firm where I had worked as a summer associate. Instead, remembering how I enjoyed government work, I researched attorney positions and applied to several government agencies, including the Department of Justice and the Office of the Legislative Council of the Senate. I ultimately received an offer from the U.S. Department of State Office of the Legal Adviser—informally known as “L.” Before becoming an Attorney-Adviser in L, I clerked for Judge Raymond L. Finch in St. Croix. Clerking in a U.S. District Court in a U.S. territory provides not only the opportunity to learn about the judicial process, but also the chance to explore the unique comparative nature of dealing with territorial law in relation to federal law.

During my time in L, I was fortunate to continue exploring the connection between international law and the processes through which rules, norms and agreements are made. The variety and quality of assignments attorneys receive in L is superb. I served on the B/61 arbitration team where I learned how to draft legal briefs, prepare witnesses, review evidence and present oral arguments before an international tribunal. Working in The Hague made the

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challenges of international lawyering more tangible given the cross-cultural and political complexities of the Tribunal. My experiences at the UN in Geneva illuminated how different the role of an international lawyer can be. Instead of presenting cases, my role at the United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC) required different tools, including negotiation, mediation and quasi-judicial oversight. During my tenure there, one task was to build consensus about how this UN organ should properly cease operations and shut down.

Being a government lawyer for any agency is not without its challenges. Professional and even personal activities can be restricted depending on the nature of one's work. Discretion is required. Also, government salaries do not compare favorably to those of private firms, and one's work does not always translate to individual achievement or advancement. Nonetheless, it was my dream job as an international lawyer.

The next stop on my professional journey was the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA). I moved to Los Angeles for family reasons, an experience that taught me the importance of finding balance in life decisions and not confusing one's job or post with one's profession. In leaving law practice and becoming the Deputy Director of UCLA's Burkle Center for International Relations and a Lecturer at UCLA Law School, I learned how to think and write like an academic. As an international lawyer, I was well aware of the close, and at times tense, relationship between the disciplines of international law and international relations. At UCLA, I had the opportunity to examine this relationship through a scholarly lens. The Center's activities also allowed me to meet and engage with leading dignitaries in both fields, including Warren Christopher, General Wesley K. Clark, Dr. Kantathi Suphamongkhon, Stephen Krasner, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and Gareth Evans as well as UCLA's own talented scholars. Such exposure was essential in my transformation from an international lawyer to an academic.

Making a career switch, albeit within the same profession, requires preparation. I readied myself for the academic job market in the following ways. First, I sought out the advice of mentors who counseled that scholarship is key. I also taught courses at UCLA and became familiar with the language and culture of academic life by attending faculty colloquia, conferences and talks.

Being a law professor has allowed me to engage in the discipline of international law in new ways. Teaching and mentoring students is immensely rewarding. Writing becomes the voice through which professors can shape and advance international legal thought. Producing good scholarship invites additional opportunities for engaging in the broader community. For example, this December, I will present my work at a pre-conference to the UN climate change talks in Copenhagen.

Joining the profession of international law has never been more important. The challenges facing our world are immense and complex. We need ambassadors for international cooperation and problem solving in every institution and at every level. My advice to those seeking a career in international law is to look in all directions. Today, there are diverse pathways into the profession and many careers one can have within the field. Opportunities abound if you know where to look for them. Find your niche, care about what you do, and you will be successful.