

Pro Bono Honors Pledge Program Frequently Asked Questions

BASIC INFORMATION

Q: What is the Pro Bono Honors Pledge Program?

A: Washington College of Law was founded on the principle of advancing the causes of low-income and underrepresented populations. The Pro Bono Honors Pledge Program furthers this goal by recognizing the voluntary, uncompensated work undertaken by WCL students while at the law school on behalf of low-income and underrepresented populations or for the public good. The program is also designed to encourage students to continue carrying out pro bono service in their careers as attorneys after graduation and is a great way for students to get experience in fields of interest.

Q: What kind of work will I be doing through the Pledge?

A: Students can work on issues of their choosing at organizations of their choosing, provided the project fits the Pledge criteria. Pro Bono work gives students exposure to fields that interest them and allows them to practice legal skills such as client interviews, accompanying clients to court, fact investigation, legal research and drafting documents. Also, many organizations need students with foreign language proficiency to interpret or translate, so the Pledge is an excellent way to put your language skills to good use!

Q: What do I have to do in order to complete the Pledge?

A: Through the program, students pledge to complete a minimum of 75 hours of pro bono and community service projects at organizations working on behalf of low-income and underrepresented populations or for the public good. At least 50 hours of the pro bono work completed must be with an organization engaged primarily in law-related or legal work. However, students may complete up to 25 of their 75 hours in non-legal community service work.

LL.M. students who volunteer for the pledge must complete a minimum of 25 hours of law-related or legal work. Due to the special difficulty of non-U.S. LL.M.'s securing a traditional law-related pro bono placement, all 25 hours of their pledge may be completed in non-law related community service placements.

There are no negative consequences for students who register for the Pledge but do not complete the minimum hours required.

Q: I'm interested! What do I need to do now?

A: Fill Out the Pledge Agreement Form: To participate in the Pro Bono Honors Pledge Program, students must first register for the program on CareerLink. To register, a student must take the following steps:

- 1) Sign on to CareerLink. If you are having trouble signing onto CareerLink, please contact careerdevelopment@wcl.american.edu
- 2) On the homepage, you will see a group of "Shortcuts" on the right-hand side of the page. Click on the one labeled "Pro Bono"
- 3) Once you are taken to the Pro Bono tab, you will see the Pro Bono Information page, which is the registration page for the Pro Bono Honors Pledge
- 4) Complete the fields on the screen and click "Submit Application" to complete your registration for the Pledge
- 5) You will now be able to report hours toward the Pledge on CareerLink

Q: Can I still pledge to participate in the Pro Bono Program if I am not a first-year student?

A: All WCL students are welcome to register for the Pro Bono Honors Pledge at any time. First-year students will have to wait until they have access to CareerLink to report their hours, but they can begin completing hours toward the Pledge earlier than that. All participants, except LL.M.s, need to complete the full 75 hours. LL.M. students who volunteer for the Pledge must complete a minimum of 25 hours of law-related or legal work. Due to the special difficulty of non-U.S. LL.M.s securing traditional law-related pro bono placement, all 25 hours of their pledge may be completed in non-law-related community service placements. There are no negative consequences for students who do not meet their pledge.

Q: What happens when I complete the Pledge?

A: Students who complete the pledge prior to the end of their final year at WCL will be distinguished in the graduation bulletin. Additionally, graduating students who have completed the pledge will be recognized at a public service awards ceremony each spring with distinction based on the total number of hours completed: Honors (75-124 hours), Outstanding Service Honors (125-174 hours) and Exceptional Service Honors (175+ hours). There are no negative consequences for students who do not complete the Pledge. Students should continue reporting hours even after they have completed the Pledge, as a special award is given to the student with the most hours reported. In addition, the school tracks the service completed by the student body for various purposes.

Q: I have completed the Pledge. Should I continue to report additional qualifying hours of service?

A: Yes! It is important to report all of the qualifying work that you have completed for several reasons: 1) to provide information for prospective students regarding the nature and culture of WCL; 2) to provide accurate information to main campus about the service completed by WCL students; 3) to provide information to Equal Justice Works, the ABA, and other law school associations and governing bodies who track such data, and, most importantly; 4) to provide the WCL community an opportunity to recognize and celebrate your commitment to public service! A special award is given to the graduating student who completed the highest number of service hours. Please note that only 25 hours of community service work may count toward the Pledge but that you should report community service above and beyond 25 hours for the reasons noted above concerning reports to main campus and external bodies.

VOLUNTEER PLACEMENT & RECORDKEEPING INFORMATION

Q: What type of work counts towards the Pro Bono Honors Pledge?

A: Community Service Placements: Students fulfilling the community service portion of their pledge may volunteer with any nonprofit engaged in work on behalf of low-income or underrepresented people.

Pro Bono Placements: Students completing the legal pro bono portion of their pledge may volunteer with qualifying nonprofit organizations, government agencies, courts, or WCL Programs. A list of possible pro bono placements in the DC Metro Area is available online at <http://www.wcl.american.edu/publicinterest/documents/SuggestedPBPlacements-UpdatedSpring2013.pdf>. This list is by no means exhaustive and students are encouraged to seek out other organizations of interest.

In general, in order to qualify, the work must:

- Be performed at a nonprofit organization, government agency, court, or qualifying WCL program.
- Be performed without the student's receiving academic credit or payment
- Be law-related
- Be on behalf of low-income/underrepresented people or for a government agency/court
- Be under the supervision of an attorney

Q. I would like to get started fulfilling hours towards my pledge, how can I find a placement that suits my interests?

A. Several resources are available to help you select a pro bono placement. The Office of Public Interest maintains a list of possible placements with brief descriptions of each organization and its work. See: <http://www.wcl.american.edu/publicinterest/documents/SuggestedPBPlacements-UpdatedSpring2013.pdf> There is also a blog devoted to publicizing current pro bono opportunities at <http://wclpublicinterest.wordpress.com/> The Assistant Director for the Office of Public Interest is available to meet with you on an individual basis to talk about your interests and suggest placements.

After you have identified possible placements, call or email the contact person at each placement to find out how to get started. Some may wish to meet you for an interview or interview you by phone. Others have well-established student pro bono programs with regularly scheduled orientations. Some placements may simply provide details explaining how to begin volunteering, without any sort of application process. Some programs require that you first complete training before volunteering.

Q: I am volunteering with a program that requires me to go through training. Does the training time count toward the Pledge?

A: The training time counts, but only if you end up putting the training to use and volunteering.

Q: I am volunteering or interning for a judge – does this count towards the Pledge?

A: Working for a judge counts toward the Pledge as being work for the public good, so long as you are not receiving credit or compensation.

- Q: I am a second-year student (or a transfer student) who has not yet registered for the Pledge. Over the past year, I have been doing a lot of volunteer work with a local organization. If I sign up now, can the pro bono work I have already done count towards the Pledge?**
- A:** Any qualifying pro bono or community service work carried out after the start of your first semester in law school will count toward the Pledge provided that it meets the criteria set out in the pledge materials.
- Q: I am volunteering with a Clinical Program by translating documents for one of the clients. Does this work count toward the Pledge?**
- A:** The hours would count towards the Pledge just as long as your work is benefiting underserved populations and you are not receiving any form of credit or compensation.
- Q: What kind of government work counts toward the Pledge?**
- A:** All government work counts toward the pledge as being work for the public good, so long as you are not receiving credit or compensation. This includes any work for a local, state or federal government agency or office.
- Q: I am volunteering with VITA (Voluntary Income Tax Assistance). Does this work count toward the Pledge?**
- A:** Volunteering with VITA is a wonderful way to contribute hours towards the Pro Bono Honors Pledge Program.
- Q: If I am working for a private firm as a summer intern and I have the opportunity to work on a pro bono case, would this count towards the pledge?**
- A:** Students can receive Pro Bono Honors Pledge credit for pro bono cases at private law firms only under the following circumstances: 1) neither the firm nor the student is receiving any pay for their work on the case, 2) the client is a member of an underserved population; and 3) the student is not receiving any academic credit for the work (e.g. an independent study or externship, etc.). If the student is otherwise receiving pay for working at the firm and wishes to take on pro bono work, the pro bono work will count towards the pledge only if the student works on the case outside of his or her normal working hours.
- Q: Does work for a faculty member or WCL program qualify towards the pro bono pledge?**
- A:** Yes, as long as the work is law-related, on behalf of underprivileged or underrepresented populations, and is not for pay or academic credit. For example, time spent conducting research for a brief in support of petition for asylum is eligible for pro bono pledge credit. Projects not for the benefit of an underprivileged or underrepresented population (such as research or editing for a casebook) are ineligible for pro bono pledge credit.
- Q: Can I get Pro Bono or Community Service Hours for organizing a conference?**
- A:** The answer is generally no. However, if the conference has an actual public service project component, the time spent participating in the public service component may qualify for pro bono or community service hours, depending on the nature of the project.

Q. How do I report hours that I have completed?

A. First, you must ensure that you have registered for the Pro Bono Honors Pledge on CareerLink (see instructions above). Next, take the following steps:

- 1) Sign on to CareerLink. If you are having trouble signing onto CareerLink, please contact careerdevelopment@wcl.american.edu
- 2) On the homepage, you will see a group of “Shortcuts” on the right-hand side of the page. Click on the one labeled “Pro Bono”
- 3) Once you are taken to the Pro Bono tab, you should be under the subtab for “Pro Bono Reporting”
- 4) You will see any hours that you have already reported
- 5) To report new hours, click on the “Add New” button
- 6) Complete the form and submit it

Q. What information will I need to have with me in order to submit my hours on CareerLink?

A. You will need to know how many hours you completed, the semester when you did the work, a start date and end date for when you worked with the placement, your supervisor’s name, and your supervisor’s email.

Q. Now that hours are being reported on CareerLink, do I have to submit hours again that I already submitted through the paper submission process?

A. No. The Office of Public Interest transferred all of the hours that you already reported into CareerLink. The transfer occurred in the summer of 2013. These hours should appear in your CareerLink profile as “Pre-Symplicity Hours.” If you think that some of your hours were lost, or if you want a breakdown of the Pre-Symplicity hours, please contact the Office of Public Interest at publicinterest@wcl.american.edu.

Q: How do I get an update on my progress toward completing the Pledge?

A: You can go on CareerLink to see how many hours you have completed. Take the following steps:

- 1) Sign on to CareerLink. If you are having trouble signing onto CareerLink, please contact careerdevelopment@wcl.american.edu
- 2) On the homepage, you will see a group of “Shortcuts” on the right-hand side of the page. Click on the one labeled “Pro Bono”
- 3) Once you are taken to the Pro Bono tab, you should be under the subtab for “Pro Bono Reporting”
- 4) You will see any hours that you have already reported and the total number of hours that you have completed will be listed as “Hour Summary” on the bottom, right-hand corner

Q: Does my supervisor have to be an attorney in order for me to receive credit for a legal pro bono placement?

A: Usually, the answer is yes. However, there are exceptions to the rule. For instance, if you canvass with the student group Take Back Your Home, then your supervisor may be a fellow student. Nonetheless, that work counts toward the Pledge because the student organizers were trained by lawyers to supervise you. You may list the student organizers as your supervisors on CareerLink. If you have questions about whether or not a placement counts as a legal placement for the Pledge, you may email your question to publicinterest@wcl.american.edu.

Q: Do I need to get my supervisor's signature in order to report hours?

A: No. You must report your supervisor's name and email address on CareerLink. The Office of Public Interest may contact your supervisor to confirm that you completed the work reported. Not every supervisor will be contacted. Rather, the Office of Public Interest will randomly choose to confirm only some hours.

Q: What if I did pro bono work last year/summer but did not register for the Pledge or report the hours– is it too late?

A: It is not too late to report the hours for Pledge credit. You may report any hours that you have completed since becoming a law student, as long as you have not already reported the hours previously.

Students are responsible for tracking and reporting their hours each semester. Although you will not be penalized for reporting them later, we encourage students to submit reported hours for each semester by the last day of classes. To get credit for completing the Pledge in the graduation bulletin at the end of your 3L year, you will need to have reported all of your hours by March or April. The Office of Public Interest will contact you with the exact deadline during the spring of your 3L year.

Q. Can I count work conducted with funding from an Equal Justice Foundation grant?

A. Generally, the answer is no because the grant constitutes financial remuneration for your work. However, you may report any extra unpaid hours towards your Pro Bono Honors Pledge, provided you were not receiving any other kind of compensation or academic credit. For example, if your EJF grant covers ten weeks of work, and you actually work for eleven weeks, you can report the additional hours outside of the period covered by the grant for pro bono credit, provided it meets the pledge criteria.

Q. Can I count work with an externship placement if I work more than the required hours?

A. Yes, you may count any externship hours that are above and beyond those required for the credits that you are receiving.

Q. I am a 1L who has not yet been given access to CareerLink. How do I report my hours?

A. 1L students are not given access to CareerLink until October. However, this should not stop you from beginning to complete hours toward the Pledge. Simply keep track of your hours and report them once you do have access to CareerLink. For each placement, keep track of how many hours you completed, the semester when you did the work, a start date and end date for when you worked with the placement, your supervisor's name, and your supervisor's email.

**Have a question you don't see answered here?
Email your question to publicinterest@wcl.american.edu
or stop by the Office of Public Interest in Suite 122.**