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A Primer for Teaching Law as an Adjunct Professor

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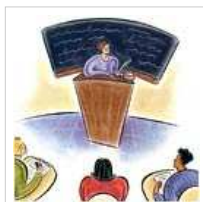
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A Primer for Teaching Law as an Adjunct Professor

Rachel A. Van Cleave [All Articles](#)

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Illustration

After practicing law and perhaps specializing in a particular area for several years, you cannot help but think, "I wish they had taught me [blank] in law school." You start to wonder whether you could teach a class at a local law school. Here are some tips for pursuing such an endeavor.

THE HIRING PROCESS

Start by taking a look at the law school's course catalog and perhaps the most recent semester schedules to determine which courses best match your areas of expertise and experience. If you know a faculty member at a local law school, talk to that person to see if he or she knows if the school is looking for adjuncts to teach in these areas. The faculty member can also tell you who hires adjunct professors. At Golden Gate University School of Law, and at many law schools, the associate dean for academic affairs hires adjunct professors, typically in consultation with faculty members who teach in related areas.

Send a cover letter and your curriculum vitae to the person who hires adjunct professors. The cover letter should explain which courses you believe best match your areas of expertise. I strongly recommend that you send a traditional resume rather than a link to your website; however, an email with these attachments is completely acceptable.

Do not be discouraged if the associate dean responds that at that time there are no courses for you to teach. I typically keep these applications on file and when a need arises, I will take another look at applications I have received. In addition, I recommend that every few months you resend your application with an email that simply indicates you are checking to see if a need has arisen. Try to avoid sounding even mildly annoyed.

In the meantime, you could work on establishing a relationship with the law school by contacting the law career services office and offering to talk about your area of practice to students. You could also contact a student group with which you might share an affinity such as the Black Law Students Association, or the American Constitutional Society student group, and offer to give a presentation or otherwise work with students. Many law schools have moot court programs, and you could offer to judge and critique a round of arguments.

If the associate dean indicates there is a need for your expertise, she will likely request that you meet with her for about half an hour. In preparation for this meeting, I recommend that you contact a professor you know to help you brainstorm about the types of questions that might come up. For example, I often ask potential adjuncts how they would approach teaching the particular course. I am interested in the lawyer's ideas for engaging the students and bringing the particular subject to life. Certainly, law schools value the practical experience that adjuncts bring to the classroom, but you want to be able to talk about how you will use your knowledge to help students understand the law.

It is likely that the associate dean will also ask you about your current workload to ensure that your schedule is conducive to teaching a course; even if you know an area exceptionally well, teaching a new course is time-consuming because the course's coverage is likely broader than your area of expertise.

GETTING READY TO TEACH

Great news! The associate dean hired you to teach. The following are tips to ensure that your new relationship with the law school flourishes.

You should first focus on which textbook to use. Someone at the law school, probably a faculty assistant, can help you contact publishers to obtain examination copies of relevant textbooks. While you want to consider the organization of the book, as well as the types of problems it includes, it is often difficult to really know which textbook works best with your teaching style until you use it. I suggest that you contact professors at other law schools who teach the same course to learn from their experience using different texts. Alternatively, you might decide to put together your own materials. This can be very labor-intensive

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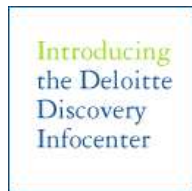
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You will also receive a faculty handbook. While this is hardly riveting reading, it is important that you read it. The handbook will set out the law school's policies in a number of areas such as: student attendance, class cancellations and makeup classes, grading curves, addressing the needs of students with disabilities, contents of syllabi as well as provisions of the code of student conduct that are relevant to the student-faculty relationship. There are often deadlines for selecting a textbook, submitting a syllabus, submitting exams and submitting final grades. You should comply with all deadlines. If you realize that you are unable to meet a deadline, it is best to let your faculty assistant or the associate dean know as soon as possible. If you are unsure or have questions, I strongly recommend that you contact the associate dean; the associate dean would much prefer to respond to such questions in an effort to prevent potential problems than have to fix problems later.

IN THE CLASSROOM

The semester has begun. You come to class fully prepared, students are interested in the materials and they have good questions. Occasionally, there is a disruptive student, or one who is absent too often. Again, the associate dean will be able to suggest how to address such situations, or put you in touch with someone who can.

Toward the end of the semester you will begin work on your final exam. If the law school's policies permit, I recommend that you give essay questions rather than multiple-choice questions. Good multiple-choice questions can be extremely difficult and time-consuming to draft and most law schools prohibit faculty from using multiple-choice questions from other sources unless you can assure the school that the questions are not available to students. Many law schools post prior essay exams on the library's website and these can give you an idea of the structure and substance of exams given at that school. It is also a good idea to have another professor, preferably someone who teaches in a similar or related area, to take a look at your exam. In addition, I recommend that you write out an answer to your own question before turning in your exam. While writing out an answer to my own exams, I have often discovered certain facts that may unintentionally lead students to discuss issues I did not want to test on, or would distract students too much from the real meat of the question. I can then revise my questions accordingly.

Grading exams -- where we really earn our compensation! It can be particularly helpful to prepare an outline of what your essay tested and your allocation of points among those areas. In addition, it is a good idea to write comments on the student essays as you grade them. Students are encouraged to meet with professors about their exams and since this could occur two to three months after you have graded, these comments will help you remember why you scored the essay as you did.

Alternatively, you might teach a course for which a research paper is the best method for evaluating students. I suggest that you inquire about any upper division writing policies, such as the parameters for such research papers in such courses. Sometimes this can depend on the number of credits assigned to the course and sometimes the standards for independent study credit apply.

I have found that each time I teach a seminar with a significant writing component, I devote more class time to discussing the writing process. In addition, I require that students begin writing early and set out deadlines by which students must submit an abstract, a detailed outline that includes sources, a polished draft and a final draft. As each of these assignments is due, I assign less reading and I devote class time to having students talk about their topic and their progress. In addition, I schedule at least two individual meetings with students to discuss their topic and progress. Because students write on different, albeit

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their papers. I keep a copy of each paper with my critiques and comments.

Congratulations! The faculty and staff at the law school have been impressed by your collegiality and attention to deadlines and details. Your preparation, organization, passion, knowledge and respectful demeanor in the classroom impressed your students. The associate dean has invited you back to teach again. Well done!

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