What follows is a compilation of letters from alumni and faculty members who have served judicial clerkships. We have included these letters to give you some candid and personal insight into the clerkship experience.

**Letter from Dean James Rasband**

Dear Student,

I hope you will consider the opportunity of a judicial clerkship. I believe it has several significant benefits.

First, it is engaging in a way that is hard to achieve during your early years of law practice. Working alongside a judge and making recommendations about issues of life, liberty, and property is a sobering and heady experience.

Second, the judge for whom you clerk will typically become a lifelong mentor to you. Judges want to see their clerks succeed. They will be eager to share wisdom and spend time guiding you. After you finish clerking, they are likely to be a source of counsel and friendship, as well as being a powerful reference.

Third, clerking is a tremendous learning experience. My year clerking on the Ninth Circuit was one of the great educational experiences of my life. When I began my clerkship, my first memo to my judge read like a law school exam answer. I dutifully spotted all of the issues and outlined the options on either side of the question. Reviewing my effort, the judge explained that what he wanted—and frankly what all clients want—was for me to exercise judgment. It was not enough to spot issues. I needed to propose a resolution and explain my reasons for the proposed resolution. I quickly learned that until I had to offer a rationale and justification, I hadn't really thought hard about the problem. When I entered law practice after the clerkship, my sense was that the training in exercising judgment and explaining that judgment was very valuable. In truth, as an appellate court clerkship, it may be that I learned a bit less about practical lawyering than do clerks at the trial level where the training in procedure is intense and very valuable if you choose to litigate. Nevertheless, what I learned changed the way I viewed law and my responsibility to clients forever.
Fourth, working for a judge engrained in me a respect for our judiciary and the rule of law. To see the care and study with which judges made decisions and attempted to achieve a just result was a powerful example of the nobility of the law and the profession in which all of us are engaged. I came away more convinced that I had chosen a noble profession.

To those of you who might be worried about the financial implications of doing a clerkship where you are typically paid much less than you would be in a law firm, I say don't. The experience is worth the one year delay and besides you are usually at least able to tread water during the clerkship year. Frankly, when you are at the end of your career, I am convinced that you will not look back and think that one more year of earnings made a difference. Take the opportunity to live someplace different, to acquire a lifelong mentor and friend, and to learn and grow in the law.

I hope that if you have questions about clerkships you will talk to me or one of my faculty colleagues. I think you will hear a uniform opinion—a clerkship would be one of the highlights of both your education and your work in the law.

Good luck with your decision.

Dean James Rasband

**Letter from Former Student**

**Name:** Sharla Dunroe  
**Judge:** Russell W. Bench, Utah Court of Appeals

A clerkship is an amazing opportunity for a few reasons. Judicial clerks are exposed to different types of law. For someone who isn’t sure what type of law to practice, a clerkship is very helpful. Also, for those who are certain as to which type of law they wish to practice, and have devoted themselves to learning/practicing a particular type of law during law school, a clerkship helps them to see whether they might be open to practicing different types of law in addition to their field of interest, thereby opening up job opportunities.

While appellate clerks may not have the opportunity to see trial practice, they are exposed to the entire case from start to finish because they review the record on appeal. Clerks are exposed to a variety of different lawyers
and lawyering styles—both good and bad. Clerks discover what is persuasive to a judge, and they are able to see how a judicial decision is made. Clerks hone their reading, researching, and writing skills.

At the very most, appellate clerks work 8 hours a day. Clerks have time to think through legal issues and to think about legal strategy. Clerks read a lot of law and become familiar with what the law actually is. Clerks form a network, both with other clerks and with judges. Clerkships are, for the most part, very relaxing. It’s a very nice break after three grueling years of law school.

The bad part about a clerkship is that it doesn’t pay well, but as a state or federal employee, the benefits are usually very good. As for obtaining a clerkship, unfortunately, I don’t have many suggestions. Mine sort of fell in my lap. I never aspired to a clerkship, nor wanted one, but I have been the recipient of many benefits because of it. I do know that grades usually play a pretty big part, but some judges aren’t as big of sticklers as others. And, the way a judge chooses a clerk is as diverse as the judging itself.

Letter from Former Student

Name: Blaine F. Bates
Judge: Robert C. Jones, U.S. Bankruptcy Court

I was asked to write a letter detailing my tenure as a law clerk. I am happy to comply and hope that my positive experience will serve as a catalyst for other law students to seek a clerkship.

My Clerkship

I am a 1994 graduate of the J. Reuben Clark Law School. During my third year, I interviewed for and was hired as a law clerk to the Honorable Robert C. Jones, Bankruptcy Judge for the District of Nevada in Las Vegas. In addition to being a bankruptcy judge with a local calendar, Judge Jones is also a member of the Ninth Circuit Bankruptcy Appellate Panel, or “BAP” as it is known. The BAP is a panel of 7 bankruptcy judges who hear bankruptcy appeals.

As a result, not only did I become familiar with the workings of the local bankruptcy court, I also got to fly to different cities in the Ninth Circuit and listen to oral argument of dozens of cases. After oral argument, I got
to sit in with the judges and listen while they decided the cases. During my clerkship I wrote 38 appellate decisions, 10 of which were published in the Bankruptcy Reporter as opinions.

My position, which began in the fall of 1994, was a two-year clerkship. It ends in three weeks, at which point I will begin working for a firm here in Las Vegas. I have thoroughly enjoyed my clerkship and highly recommend the experience. In this letter, I will attempt to highlight the pros and cons of my clerkship and also give a little advice to those students seeking a federal clerkship.

Clerkship Pros

1. Writing and Research Experience

Any clerkship will develop good writing and research experience, if the clerk makes the effort to improve. Appellate clerkships, of course, are more intense in this regard, but even a district court clerkship will provide ample writing and research opportunities. Strong research and writing skills are valuable assets in your job search.

2. The View From the Bench

The insight into the behind-the-scenes functioning of the court system is invaluable to a clerk who intends to go on to private practice. In addition to becoming familiar with your judge’s particular likes and dislikes, you also learn practical things such as where and how to file pleadings and documents, how the local calendar is run, notice requirements, local and federal rules of civil procedure, etc. In addition, you learn to view legal confrontations from a judge’s point of view: i.e., both sides’ versions of the facts are usually wrong and most conflicts are best settled out of court. Judge Jones has gone into settlement conferences where both parties have adamantly refused to settle and informed the parties that it would be in their best interest to “cut the baby in half” because neither party was going to be happy with his decision if it went to trial. This kind of insider knowledge helps you serve your clients better.

3. Quality of Life

Although some clerkships might entail periods of time when you are extremely busy and some judges may be more demanding than others,
federal clerkships are generally an 8-5 proposition with decent pay and good benefits.

4. Job Prospects

Working as a law clerk gives you a good opportunity to become familiar with the area and local attorneys. As your clerkship nears an end, you generally have a good idea of what attorneys practice what type of law and which firms are good employers. In addition, most employers look upon a clerkship as a positive factor. Several of the firms in Las Vegas only hire law clerks.

Clerkship Cons

1. Obnoxious Judges

Although most of the judges that I have come into contact with are genuinely nice people, there are a few out there that I would never want to work for. If you get an interview with a judge, ask their clerks how they like working for that judge, and what is expected of them. If they are anything less than enthusiastic about their relationship with the judge, proceed with caution. A good judge will allow his law clerks latitude in writing orders and decisions. In addition, a good judge will value his law clerk’s opinion on undecided or ambiguous issues of law. Judge Jones is great in both these respects. However, I have worked with judges who write most of their own decisions, treat their law clerks like first year associates in a large firm, and require them to work nights and weekends. If you are going to be treated like that, you may as well be making $75,000 and driving a Porsche instead of $35,000 and the ’82 Civic associated with most law clerks.

2. Job Problems.

There are also potential pitfalls in finding a job after your clerkship that you should be aware of. First, if you clerk for more than one year (as I did), some bigger firms might think that you are “soft” and will be unable to “shift into higher gear”; i.e., work 60-80 hour weeks. Second, if your clerkship is in a specialized area (such as immigration, tax, or bankruptcy), many firms will brand you as a “bankruptcy” or “tax” lawyer. This is okay if they are looking for someone with that experience, but could very well cost you the job if they are looking for a general litigation associate. I have personally been on both sides of this fence. The firm that ultimately hired me was looking for a bankruptcy clerk. On the other hand, I have had my resume
returned to me because the firm did not need a “bankruptcy” attorney (even though I told them that I did not have my heart set on practicing bankruptcy), and I have interviewed with countless firms where a partner has asked me, “What is a bankruptcy attorney doing looking for a job as a litigator?” Finally, some firms who hire clerks do not give the clerks credit for their clerkship. In other words, even though you have been out of law school for one or two years, you start out as a first year associate with a first year associate’s pay.

Advice on Getting a Clerkship

1. Do your homework

Mass mailings of applications to every federal judge is a highly inefficient way to find a job. Speaking as someone who has hired two law clerks in the past two years, if we get an unsolicited resume from a law student during a time when we are not actively seeking a law clerk, we assume that resume is just part of a mass mailing and we do not spend much time reviewing it. Before sending out resumes, call the judge’s chambers and speak to the judge’s law clerk. The law clerk will instantly be able to tell you when and if a clerkship is available. This will save you time, money, and frustration.

2. Location, location, location!

Don’t send resumes to judges in areas of the country where you cannot afford to go interview or where you do not intend to live. This wastes your money and the judge’s time. I have spent hours pouring over resumes and selecting candidates to interview, only to call and find out that the candidate has no interest in interviewing, either because he or she could not afford to fly out to the interview or because they really did not want to live in Las Vegas. As a result, judges tend to ignore resumes from other parts of the country because they know that many of these applicants won’t come even if invited.

3. Be sincere

It is easy to spot mass mailings with cover letters in that state, “I want to interview for this job because it has been my life-long dream to live in _________ (fill in the blank) and practice __________ (fill in the blank) law.” If you really have a particular reason why you want a particular clerkship or want to live in a particular state or city, state it. Otherwise, don’t give the law clerk an easy reason to place your application in the round file.
4. Submit a good writing sample

However, stay away from highly emotional or controversial subjects like pornography, graphic sex crimes or abortion. Law school professors love to shock their students by giving them writing assignments based upon these types of issues. Not only may the fact situation turn the judge’s or law clerk’s stomach, but they may disagree with your position. Not that this would ever be the primary factor in choosing not to interview you, but it takes the focus away from how good your writing is and places the focus on the validity of your position. In addition, if you choose to submit a writing sample on a subject you judge and law clerk are very familiar with (for example, sending in a bankruptcy writing sample to a bankruptcy judge), make sure it is a thorough and accurate treatment of the subject. Have a practitioner or faculty member familiar with that subject look it over substantively. I have both rejected applicants because their bankruptcy writing sample demonstrated a thorough lack of understanding of the concept and accepted applicants for an interview because their writing sample demonstrated an excellent grasp of bankruptcy basics.

A federal judicial clerkship can be a highly informative and rewarding experience, and I highly recommend it