Deciding Whether to Split Your Summer

Many Columbia Law School students will pursue careers that involve both the public and private sectors. While in law school, you have numerous opportunities to explore both sectors, including through summer employment. This might mean you spend one summer in the public sector and one in the private. Alternatively, some students choose to split their 2L summer employment between two employers—most often, a law firm followed by a public interest or government employer. When we refer to split summers, we generally mean 2L summer; we strongly discourage 1L summer splits.

The decision to split your 2L summer is nuanced and individualized—there is no "one-size-fits-all" advice on whether to split your summer or what kind of split to pursue. The decision is extraordinarily complicated and may have implications for your future employment. You should meet with advisers from the Office for Public Interest/Public Service Law and Careers (the PI/PS Office) and the Office of Private Sector Careers (OPSC) to discuss whether a split summer makes sense for you and, if so, how to conduct your search.

Types of Splits

Firm-Sponsored Split: Private and Public Sectors
A few firms sponsor split private/public sector summer programs, including Simpson Thacher and Paul Hastings. The firm pays you for the whole summer, and you spend at least half at the firm and a number of weeks at a public interest employer. Your firm salary is intended to cover both your work at the firm and your unpaid public interest work.

Student-Initiated Split: Private and Public Sectors
You secure a summer associate position with a firm and then request to split the summer with a public interest employer. The firm pays you while you are working there, but you fund the rest of the summer, as public interest work is typically unpaid. Usually, this kind of split requires you to work more than 10 weeks of your summer. Market forces may limit firms' willingness to allow a split. Please speak with an OPSC counselor before approaching your summer firm about this type of arrangement.

Pros and Cons of Splitting Your Summer

A split can allow you to:

- Explore two different options to get a sense of your best fit.
- Make money to help pay for the public interest half of your summer, which is often unpaid.
- Experience two geographic locations.
- Receive greater variety of substantive work.
- Increase the breadth of experience on your resume.
- Build your professional network.

However, a split summer may:

- Reduce your chances at getting your first-choice placements if you can only be there half the summer. Many employers will not consider splits.
- Result in receiving less interesting or substantive assignments.
- Provide less opportunity to get to know either employer's work, culture, your "fit" there, etc.
- Provide fewer opportunities to get to know the lawyers you work with (and those in the field more broadly) or cultivate mentors.
- Limit the opportunities to "prove" yourself, which could affect the quality of your references and your chances at a fellowship sponsorship or job offer.
- Make it harder to build a strong public interest resume.
- Lead some employers to question your actual interest in their work.
- Cause you to miss components of established summer programs (social events, brown bags, speakers, getting to know other interns/associates, doing pro bono work at the firm, etc.).
- Present potential conflicts of interest.

Logistics of a Split Summer

- Generally, for a student-initiated split, you should secure the firm position first. (Firm-sponsored splits have specific application processes.)
- Do not discuss your interest in a split summer until you receive an offer from a firm.
- Once you receive the firm's offer, but before you accept, check the firm's split summer policy in the NALP Directory and Symplicity. Next, discuss your plan with OPSC, and then ask the firm about splitting your summer with a public interest or government employer.
- If the firm is amenable to a split, work with a PI/PS adviser to plan your approach for finding a public sector placement.
- Public interest and government employers have been open to splits on a case-by-case basis, although some do not allow it because they require interns to work a full summer.
- Your PI/PS adviser can provide input on your public interest cover letter, including whether to mention your interest in a split summer.