Experience through service: making a difference at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Elon Law’s Center for Professional Development works with the United States Department of Veteran’s Affairs (VA) to help students earn externships and internships in the Department’s Winston-Salem and Washington, D.C. offices. The Office of Regional Counsel in Winston-Salem provides Elon Law students with valuable experience that contributes to the VA’s important mission. Chris Smith, Assistant Dean for Professional Development at the law school, says he appreciates the strong relationship between Elon and the VA.

“The Office of Regional Counsel in Winston-Salem has been a valuable partner in our efforts to expand placement opportunities for students,” Smith said. “We’re glad that our students and graduates are developing legal careers in a federal legal affairs office that is well-known for its professionalism and dedicated staff.”

From 2010 to 2013, eight students have worked with the VA offices. In addition, two alumni are currently working as attorneys with the VA. Based in Winston-Salem, Daniel C. Rattray is Regional Counsel for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs region covering North Carolina and Virginia.

“Everyone in our office looks forward to working with our externs from Elon Law,” Rattray says. “As individuals, and collectively, they have proved to be special folks: bright, mature and engaged – and each one of our externs has, in his or her own way, improved our externship program. We are consistently and delightfully impressed with each student’s authentic desire to make the externship experience for the next student better and more meaningful than their own.”

Monique Smart ’14 reinforces the positive relationship between Elon and the Office of Regional Counsel in Winston-Salem.

“Everyone in the office is so kind and open to teaching you various aspects of the law,” Smart said. “The office handles different areas such as contracts, ethics, employment, torts and collections. The attorneys are more willing to give you a variety of assignments to work on and are always providing feedback so that you can improve.”

Phillip Clontz ’12 who is now a Risk Management and Compliance Officer at Pendleton Financial in Raleigh, N.C., says his time with the VA office in Winston-Salem provided career advantages.

“It was a great opportunity to expand my breadth of knowledge in health care law and government regulation,” Clontz said. “While most of my prior work experiences had been in the corporate realm of the United States healthcare system, I was able to explicate upon my limited public health experiences in evaluating medical malpractice claims in the VA system. I think this position was a vital stepping stone in elevating me into my current career, and the experience enabled me to acquire skills necessary to be successful in healthcare and government regulation moving forward.”

Nicholas Livengood ’15, who interned in the VA’s Winston-Salem office in 2013, credits his internship for the opportunities it presented to apply leadership skills on a daily basis by interacting with practicing lawyers and handling sensitive client matters.

“My time with VA was extremely beneficial, as it allowed me to handle claims and work with legal issues which I had not seen before,” says Livengood. “The experience taught me the importance of working with clients who are unfamiliar with legal issues in a way that allows both parties to reach an understanding, and ultimately, a successful conclusion.”

Smith says the relationships that are building between Elon and employers like the VA are what excites the law school’s Center for Professional Development team.

“It’s really gratifying to help law students embark on employment experiences that involve strengthening the federal agency servicing American veterans,” Smith says. “The stories of their work not only to advance the mission of the VA, but also to serve veterans directly in many instances, is part of what makes our work at the Center for Professional Development rewarding on a personal level.”

Rattray agrees.

“I regard our relationship with Elon Law’s Center for Professional Development as one of our office’s most highly valued external partnerships,” Rattray says. “Our Elon externs have provided invaluable assistance in our delivery of legal services to our VA clients and the nation’s veterans. We have also been fortunate enough to hire a recent Elon Law grad, whose externship in our office turned out to be an extended job interview. I look forward to continuing and enhancing our relationship as we work together to develop future lawyers and, no doubt, leaders in the legal profession.”

Nicholas Livengood ’15 interned in the VA’s Winston-Salem Office of Regional Counsel in the summer of 2013. Erin Brady Rega ’12 completed an externship and is now a staff attorney in that office.