

# Public interest fund is helping out law students

By Jason Keuter  
Emerald Contributor

The rewards of pursuing a career in public interest law rarely include the reward of financial gain. With escalating tuition prices and smaller financial aid packages, more and more law students are graduating heavily in debt.

These financial facts mean students will usually avoid low-paying public interest work because first-year salaries don't leave room for paying off their debts.

Two years ago, a group of University law students founded the Oregon Law Students' Public Interest Fund. Because of the low or non-existent salaries for legal interns in the public interest field, OLSPIF was founded to provide financial assistance to students wishing to work in public interest positions.

**'A student would find it difficult ... to keep up with their student loan payments on a first-year, public interest law job.'**

— Diane Coyne,  
OLSPIF co-director

the three available stipends.

Any law student in good academic standing can apply for a stipend. Applicants must submit an essay telling why they want to work in public interest law. They must also get a letter from a prospective employer, and that employer must demonstrate an inability to pay for that student's work, said OLSPIF co-director Diane Coyne.

The job must last for at least 10 weeks and not extend into fall term. Although stipends are free to work for groups that may do political lobbying, the student's work cannot be directed toward lobbying efforts.

"We don't want to discourage students from working for organizations that may have a political agenda," Coyne said. "But because of our tax status

as a non-profit organization, that student cannot lobby themselves, nor can their work be directed toward that end."

Applications are anonymous and are reviewed by a combined student/faculty committee. Coyne said she hopes that OLSPIF will eventually establish a fund to assist graduates with debt payments who go into public interest law.

"A student would find it difficult, if not impossible, to keep up with their student loan payments on a first-year, public interest law job," she said.

Such a fund would expand OLSPIF's efforts to encourage students to go into public interest law, an area of law students are finding increasingly difficult to commit to because of financial burdens.

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In the spring of 1990, OLSPIF conducted its first pledge drive. Law students and faculty were asked to pledge one day of their summer salary to the fund. The drive raised \$7,000.

Diane Conradi and Bob Shavelson were the first recipients of OLSPIF stipends, getting \$1,000 and \$2,500 respectively.

During the summer of 1990, Conradi worked for DNA Legal Services, an American Indian legal assistance organization in Mexican Hat, Utah.

Shavelson was a legal intern at the Natural Resources Council of Maine. He is presently interning for Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., in Washington D.C., and will return to the law school winter term.

OLSPIF was able to award three stipends for summer 1991. One recipient, second-year law student Michele Coker, received a \$2,500 stipend. Coker worked for the Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence from May until mid-August.

Coker said she came to the law school to pursue public interest law, particularly women's legal issues.

"I want to help women use the legal system to their advantage," she said.

Coker credits getting her current job at the University's Office of Student Advocacy to the contacts and experience she gained from her internship.

"It's wouldn't have happened, " she said. Coker deals with issues of sexual discrimination at her new job as well. She is also a co-director of the Women's Law Forum.

The number of stipends available for summer 1992 will be determined after OLSPIF collects pledges made during last spring's pledge drive. Last year, 14 students applied for

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