

Anatomy of a Successful Public Interest
Fellowship Proposal: Writing Persuasively to
Convey “Why You?” and “Why This Work?”



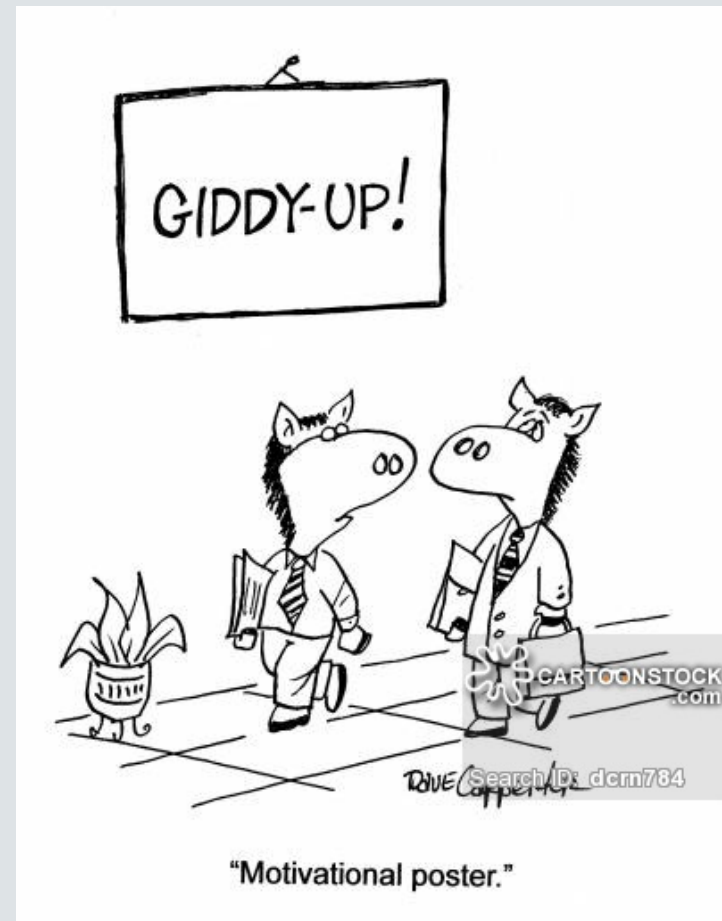
Welcome!! A bit of background...

- What's a Fellowship?
- Fellowship Boot Camp
 - What is it?
 - What do I need to do to participate?
- Deadlines for Fellowships
 - Skadden - Sept. 18th
 - Independence - Sept. 25th
 - Equal Justice Works - Sept. 27th
- Save the Date for Fellowship Boot Camp Meetings on September 6th, 7th, 8th, and 11th

Today's Focus

Convincing a fellowship funder that you are the perfect candidate for your project by clearly articulating:

What motivates you to do this work with this particular client population??



Describing Your Project

- Successful project proposals are written in close collaboration with your host organization.
- Tips for working with your host organization on this part of the application:
 - Articulate a Need that is Significant
 - Provide Evidence of the Need
 - Be the Solution
 - Focus on Your Clients
 - Demonstrate Your Passion
 - Demonstrate Community Buy-in if Possible
 - Show Your Execution Abilities
 - Show Sustainability
- Review public interest fellowship materials on our [website](#), including [“Project Based Fellowship Q&A”](#) with Professor Paoletti and the [Skadden Foundation Director’s Presentation from March 2016](#)

Begin with Self-Reflection



Examples of Strong Writing and Story Telling

- We will now walk through specific examples from successful fellowship applications and analyze why they worked...



Examples from Past Applications: Skadden Essay # 2

- The prompt: *Select one or two previous public interest projects and state briefly (300 words) their significance.*
- This question is asking you why YOU can make this project work and why you are connected to this specific client community. This is your opportunity to describe why you are the best fit for the project you just described in response to Essay # 1.

Skadden Essay # 2: Example 1

Mary, a 17-year-old girl from Guatemala, had traveled on her own to the United States four years earlier to reunite with her mother, Eli. Soon after Mary arrived, a gang in Guatemala murdered Mary's father. Although Mary had minimal contact with her father, who had abused her mother and abandoned Mary when she was young, the gang had threatened to kill her father's entire family, including Mary. She had been referred to the Penn Child Advocacy Clinic for assistance gaining Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) status so that she could remain safely in the United States. **As a student in the clinic, my job was to obtain an order from Family Court finding that her father had abandoned her and that it was not in her best interest to return to Guatemala.**

The goal for the hearing was to ensure that the judge understood Mary's full story, and saw that Mary and Eli were much more than undocumented immigrants. Instead, Mary was a girl who had experienced domestic violence, abandonment, and death threats, and was legally entitled to and deserving of SIJ status. We worked closely with Mary and Eli on their testimony, **preparing them to tell their own story.** At the hearing, Eli testified first. We diligently went through the questions we had practiced. When Eli finished, although we had prepared for Mary to testify and a closing argument, the judge declared that she was ready to sign the order. **Everyone was exuberant, and Eli was thrilled that she had made such a difference in her daughter's case.**

In order to advocate for a client's legal rights, a public interest attorney must ensure that the judge determining the client's fate sees the individual in front of the court as a full person, and not just as the act or circumstance that brought him or her into court. Our obligation is also to empower our clients to advocate for themselves, to tell their own story, and to feel confident speaking, as Eli did. This lesson in client empowerment was fundamental to my growth as a public interest attorney and my understanding of the role of a legal advocate.

I have seen the importance of storytelling and empowerment in my legal public interest work throughout law school. **As the co-founder and co-director of the Penn Youth Advocacy Project, I created an interdisciplinary pro bono project bringing together law students and social work students to advocate on behalf of youth involved in the adult criminal justice system.** Our fellows work closely with their youth clients to develop mitigation reports aimed at convincing the court to transfer cases out of the adult system. Throughout these projects, we have sought to share the stories and voices of young people who have been impacted by a system that persists in treating children as adults. Whether by helping our clients to write letters to their judges, or by connecting with young people who were formerly involved in the criminal system and want to advocate for systemic change, the best advocates are often the clients. When we can help empower our clients to tell their own stories, our advocacy is at its best.

Skadden Essay # 2: Example 2

In the seemingly lawless world of debt collection, the fight is rarely fair. Debtors often represent themselves, facing aggressive attorneys who are expert in the law and court procedures. Up against collectors willing to bend the rules, a family can see a single default spiral into financial distress that threatens their house. Yet, in low-income communities, consumers struggle to access basic legal help to resolve these crises.

At the Penn Law Civil Practice Clinic, I represented two seniors facing potentially life-changing debt collection. **A debt buyer was attempting to collect on John Robert's nephew's student loans, which John allegedly co-signed, putting his home at risk.** Every conversation we had circled back to his home: how hard he worked to pay off his mortgage; and how, with his eye condition and deteriorating sight, the familiar house meant retiring with independence. **To defend John and protect his home, I meticulously catalogued deficiencies in the lawsuit and loan documents. I also cultivated a trusting relationship with John, and when my investigations revealed his nephew may have committed fraud, John freely shared personal details. I drafted a forceful objection and answer that prompted the debt buyer to drop the lawsuit.**

For Michael Andrews, debt collection's greatest threat was to his marriage because his wife had not known about some of his debts. **Michael introduced me to the stigma that prevents many people from accessing bankruptcy's powerful remedies. On paper, he was an ideal candidate for bankruptcy, but he believed it was dishonorable.** He wanted to rebuild his financial life in a way that demonstrated responsibility to his wife. **Honoring Michael's priorities, I proposed an affordable payment plan to the lender, attempting to use his ability to file bankruptcy as leverage.** When the lender demanded full payment and the dispute went to court, I persuaded the judge that the lender was not entitled to years of usurious interest and illegal fees.

During law school, I also worked to balance these debt collection fights by collaborating with Philadelphia attorneys to design the Penn Law Consumer Rights Project. We enlisted other students to inform borrowers of their rights and defenses, such as the basic demand that a collector produce evidence of a contract, by holding know-your-rights trainings. **When we struggled to successfully advertise this new resource, I learned that identifying the need for a service is not enough. In my project, I will ensure that bankruptcy representation reaches the people who need it, by partnering with housing counselors and local organizations to design a community outreach presentation that engages homeowners about the benefits of bankruptcy and dispels the belief that bankruptcy is shameful or irresponsible.**

Skadden Essay # 2: Example 3

In college, **I returned to the coalfields** and started an AmeriCorps*VISTA project about water quality. The project resulted in a local 501(c)(3) nonprofit community watershed organization, Headwaters, Inc., that has become an institutional vehicle for environmental education and restoration projects.

I started my VISTA project because pollution due to irresponsible mining and lack of sewage infrastructure was an impediment to community well-being and economic growth. Clean water was inaccessible. **Because restoration would take time, I focused on creating the civic capacity to sustain lasting change. Today, the organization that I formed continues to grow its membership from a cross-section of the community, including a mining engineer, a high school teacher, and an attorney.**

This experience developing a public interest organization **allowed me to build upon my community roots in the region where my Skadden project will operate and brought together a variety of stakeholders on controversial topics. Because the region's economy is dependent on the coal industry, it requires a delicate approach to build coalitions to address local problems related to mining without alienating neighbors who consider themselves "Friends of Coal." The trust built through years of organizing will help people understand that the work I am undertaking is rooted in a sincere desire to better a region where economic independence and a healthier future are essential.**..... [last two paragraphs removed]



Skadden Essay # 2: Main Take-Aways

1. Tell a story about your prior experiences including clients
2. Be concise because every word counts
3. Be persuasive: use descriptive language for clients, issues, the work and yourself
4. Highlight lessons learned from prior experience that impact your project
5. Tie your experiences back to the project to create a cohesive narrative
6. Compare and contrast experiences, clients, outcomes
7. Don't shy away from emotions; demonstrate your commitment
8. Be specific in your language about issues, roles and work

Skadden Essay # 3

- The prompt: *State briefly (300 words) your sense of the relevancy of public interest work to contemporary society.*
- This question is asking what motivates you to be a public interest lawyer each and every day and what will continue to motivate you for the duration of your legal career?

Skadden Essay # 3: Example 1

I met Emily when she was twelve years old. ...Emily had experienced physical abuse, parental incarceration, and child welfare system involvement. She struggled with academics and anger, and often acted out in school. She was eventually transferred to a disciplinary school, which emphasized physical restraint over trauma informed responses to student outbursts. While there, Emily got into a fight with another student, was arrested, and placed on probation. As her program coordinator, I referred Emily to services and helped her develop strategies for handling her anger. **However, I knew Emily needed more than I could provide. She needed someone to enforce her rights and help her navigate the educational, social service, and legal systems affecting her life.**

Throughout the three years I worked at Congreso, I developed close relationships with many of the youth in my program. I became intimately acquainted with their pasts, their struggles, and their goals. I also learned how many, like Emily, were system-involved. I worked hard to create a program that was responsive to their needs, but felt limited in my ability to help my students address the circumstances and challenges that were having the biggest impact on their lives. **I could not bring an administrative complaint to contest the school's decision to expel Jose after he defended himself against bullies, or to address the bruising on Emily's body as a result of her school's physical restraint. I also could not ensure that Sara's interest in remaining in her grandmother's custody was represented at her next child welfare hearing. I decided to go to law school to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to advocate for the interests and needs of young people like my students.**

What led me to law school was the sense of frustration, disempowerment, and lack of control I felt coming from my students and their families. Legal advocacy can only be one part of the solution; public interest work is done best when people with different perspectives and experiences come together to support individual clients, and change systems to be more responsive to clients' needs. But the role of a legal advocate is critical. **As a public interest attorney, my goal is to help young people and their families understand the systems impacting their lives, find their voices within those systems, assert their rights, voice their interests, and gain back a sense of control over their lives, circumstances, and futures.**

Skadden Essay # 3: Example 2

As a clerk for Judge Stong of the Eastern District of New York Bankruptcy Court, I witnessed hundreds of people use bankruptcy to fight for their homes. Their successes and failures stirred in me both great optimism and deep frustration. When Judge Stong approved families' Chapter 13 plans to repay debts and cure mortgage arrears, people beamed with appreciation and hope. After years defending against foreclosure or debt collection, these debtors took control and faced creditors on bankruptcy's more level playing field.

However, **I also saw promising cases get dismissed, often because the family had no attorney to guide them in this highly technical process. When homeowners attempt to navigate bankruptcy alone - as more than half of Chapter 13 debtors in the Eastern District do - they rarely meet the deadlines and intimidating requirements.** Standing before the court, they often looked disheartened, as they realized the process is too complex to learn as you go. There were many pro se debtors whose faces we never saw: people filing on the eve of a foreclosure sale, desperate to gain even a few weeks reprieve from an empty petition, even one dismissed before a single hearing. From our court's prose law clerk, I learned that many people find bankruptcy too late and could avoid foreclosure by filing soon after defaulting on their mortgages.

While my year at the bankruptcy court gave me a deep understanding of its technicalities, I struggled at times with the court's objective role. It reminded me of working as a public affairs consultant, when I had a front row seat to devastation after the housing crash. In one of the world's most affluent cities, I traveled from the financial district where companies had made those loans, to outer boroughs where foreclosure was ravaging neighborhoods. I stood with families suing their lenders and others squatting in their foreclosed homes. I used a media spotlight to amplify the voices of advocates fighting for a state foreclosure moratorium, for access to loan modifications, and for recognition that lenders had structured mortgages as a short-term source of profit, rather than a long-term investment in families and communities. But, I believe that enforcing housing rights should not depend on press attention. I decided to become a public interest lawyer to directly advocate for people facing housing and financial crises.

I will dedicate my career to defending the housing, consumer, and economic rights of marginalized communities, and to enforcing the rules of our lending system to prevent the powerful from benefiting at the expense of the vulnerable. **With my versatile skillset, I hope to be the advocate low-income homeowners have needed - and deserve.**

Skadden Essay # 3: Example 3


I am from Whitesburg, a small town in the very southeastern edge of Kentucky, which is where ACLC's office is located. Both sides of my family have been in the mountains of Kentucky for generations. My maternal grandfather was a local lawyer who represented coal companies. My paternal grandfather was a coal miner with a tenth grade education who ran a shift known for being safe and productive. My parents bridged this divide and are both documentary filmmakers with Appalshop, a non-profit media arts center in Whitesburg.

The statistics about poverty in the region demonstrate a deep, persistent, and complex problem, but when I was growing up, I saw the people, not the numbers. For example, when I was a child my neighbor was a World War II veteran whose house lacked indoor plumbing. I played in the woods with his grandchildren and saw them as my peers even though I had the privilege of a house with running water. A reporter once asked Rep. Carl Perkins, the longtime congressman from eastern Kentucky, why he cared so much about poverty in Appalachia. Perkins' response was "I can't turn away." I know this feeling as I have repeatedly returned to the mountains despite other opportunities.

In law school, I found a passion for the legal process, seeing that direct service allows lawyers to fight injustices that can keep people in poverty. A practice that combines administrative, trial, and appellate advocacy will allow me to focus on the inequities that affect my coalfield community. Later in my career, I would like to engage in policy advocacy, but I want to focus my early career on becoming a legal expert.

My wife and I recently bought a home and settled in Whitesburg. My wife is one of two Ob/Gyn doctors in town while I am clerking on the Sixth Circuit. During my clerkship, I have gained experience and insight into the most effective ways to identify cases for strategic litigation and argue administrative law cases on appeal.

My wife and I are deeply rooted in the community. **Coal miners are our family, our neighbors, and our lifelong friends.** This project would allow me to start my career doing my dream job and prepare me for a lifetime of advocating for coal miners and their families.



Skadden Essay # 3: Main Take-Aways

1. Showcase your talent, dedication and passion for the project
2. Highlight your ability to be a leader in your project
3. Disclose personal information with a purpose
4. Relate the question back to your project
5. Weave together a narrative about what led you to this project
6. Emphasize that you are in this work for the long run and the project is the first step in a long career dedicated to the public interest





Questions?

Top Overall Take-aways

- Start earlier than you think!
 - You will go through multiple revisions so start the writing process early and be prepared to edit.
- Tell a human and emotive story
 - About yourself and about your clients
- Convey a sense of urgency for your project
- Create a cohesive application with a theme
- Provide vivid snapshots and descriptions
 - Leave the reader with something memorable as a whole
- Your application as a whole should answer these big three Qs: Why this project/client? Why this org? Why you?
- Call Susan Butler Plum if applying for Skadden
- Reach out to Neta, Professors Finck and Paoletti for help

See you at Boot Camp!

- Please direct all questions about the fellowship process to Neta Borshansky at nborshan@law.upenn.edu.

