

Vermont Law School
J.D. Externship Program
Semester in Practice Work Commitment Policy

In the Semester in Practice course, students work “on-site” for an entire semester apprenticing alongside a legal professional. This document sets out the Work Commitment Policy to which students must adhere to meet the 15-week on-site work requirement for the course practicum component (the “15-Week Requirement”).

The Semester in Practice course offers a total of 14 credits toward your JD degree. 12 credits are for the work on site (the “practicum component”). They qualify as “experiential credits” for purposes of the VLS experiential credit requirement and are graded on a pass-fail basis. Two additional credits are earned for a companion academic component (the “classroom component”). They qualify as “classroom credits” and are letter-graded.

In general, the Work Commitment Policy requires that, to meet the 15-Week Requirement and earn the 12 pass-fail credits for the practicum component, students must work the full-time weekly work schedule of the office in which they are placed for 15 calendar weeks. What counts toward the 15-Week Requirement? It depends.

Below are some FAQs designed to illustrate the contours of the Policy. Inevitably, a small number of enrolled students each semester will encounter questions not answered below. Those questions should be directed to the assigned faculty supervisor. Any decisions by a faculty supervisor on work commitment questions not covered by this document, including what is “reasonable” or “unreasonable,” are final.

1. How many hours must I work to meet the 15-Week Requirement?

Full-time externships are designed to simulate the demands of a legal professional’s work load and regular schedule. Legal professionals rarely work in a setting where a strict, 40-hour work week is the rule. We’ve designed the practicum work commitment with that in mind. The practicum is based on calendar weeks, and you must work the full-time weekly work schedule of the office in which you are placed for 15 calendar weeks. That likely means you will work more than 40 hours a week at the work site in any one, several, or all of the 15 calendar weeks of the externship semester. It may also mean that some students in each semester work substantially more or less than their classmates while earning the same number of credits.

2. If I miss a day of work, does it count toward the 15-Week Requirement?

The answer to this question depends on the reason the day is missed, and this document attempts to answer the question in the most common areas encountered by externship students:

- a. If the office is closed for a federal or state holiday or other reason (i.e., office retreat, weather closure, etc.), you do not have to make up that day or those days that occur during the semester. We count “calendar weeks,” not hours or days, in determining whether the 15-Week Requirement has been met.

- b. You are allowed a reasonable amount of time out of the office to participate in activities qualifying as “professional development,” such as a reasonable number of educational conferences or job interviews.
- c. Time devoted to most law review or journal tasks, AAA briefs, MPRE study, AWRs/IRPs, bar applications, or extracurricular activities for a VLS or other organization does not qualify as “professional development.” A key role in a law review or journal symposium may qualify as “professional development,” but a student serving in such role should get approval to count days spent on campus during such symposia from their faculty supervisor and supervising attorney. The same rule applies to participating in team competitions for AAA or other similar courses or extracurricular team or individual pursuits – those days may count with permission from your faculty supervisor and supervising attorney.
- d. You need not makeup a reasonable number of days missed where illness prevents attendance at the office.
- e. You do not get credit for “personal” or “vacation” days, unless the day is due to office closure for a holiday or other closure listed in “a.” above.
- f. On a case by case basis your faculty supervisor may approve missed days for other activities not described above, if your supervising attorney approves it in advance.

With the exception of illness, you must have approval of your supervising attorney and faculty supervisor for any days spent out of the office during the regular work schedule in order for those days to count toward the 15-Week Requirement. Depending on your total absences, your faculty supervisor may add an extra week or number of days to your end-date for your externship.

3. How do I make up days out of the office that do not count toward the 15-Week Requirement?

Full-time externs are assigned a fixed start date, and the end date is tentatively set by counting 15 calendar weeks forward from that date. If work days are missed during the semester that do not fall within one of the exceptions above, or if an unreasonable number of days are missed for reasons within those exceptions, the end date is extended by an equal number of days.

4. Can I work extra hours in addition to regular work days to make up for missed time that is not within an exception above?

No. Work day length in the legal profession is rarely fixed and regular. In order to simulate the professional work schedule, adding hours to work days does not count toward making up missed days that are not within exceptions listed above.

5. Can I work from home?

No. “Telecommuting” time does not count toward the 15-Week Requirement. The only limited exceptions may be where weather conditions or other unforeseen circumstances make travel to the work site impossible or unsafe. Approval to work off-site due to other unforeseen circumstances is at the discretion of your faculty supervisor.

6. Does work done for the “classroom component” count toward the 15-Week Requirement?

Classroom component assignments requiring conferences with your supervising attorney, your faculty supervisor, or any conference calls/video conferences for that component your faculty supervisor schedules during the regular work day counts toward the 15-Week Requirement.

Time spent writing journals and your final paper, and drafting evaluation paperwork does not count toward the 15-Week Requirement.

You are expected to work on assigned legal work from the externship work site while in the office on a full-time basis in order to earn the practicum credits. If you do not have enough work to do at your externship site, you should ask your supervising attorney for assignments and/or consult with your faculty supervisor about how to approach your supervisor for additional assignments.

7. Can I take time out of the regular externship work week to attend or participate in the work and assignments of a regularly scheduled class at VLS, at another law school, or online?

No. Your externship “practicum” work is a regularly scheduled class, and you are required to work at your externship site on a full-time basis for 15 calendar weeks. Past experience has indicated that additional coursework on top of this full-time work requirement negatively impacts students’ performance. VLS’ Academic Regulations do not allow you to enroll in any additional courses during your externship semester unless you first receive approval from the Director of J.D. Externships.

If you are granted approval to enroll in a course in addition to your externship course, you may not work on the course-work of that additional course during the regular work week of your externship. This restriction applies whether the course is a distance learning or residential course at VLS or another institution.

8. Can I “make-up” time I miss by during the regular work week by working nights, weekends, or holidays?

Many lawyers and legal professionals work nights, weekends, and holidays, in addition to a regular work week. While you are not required to work those days (or nights) during your externship, you may not “make up” missed regular business days at your externship site by working extra evening hours, weekend days, or holidays. Again, the program seeks to simulate, within reason, the professional and other demands of legal professionals.