

Honors Programs in the Intelligence Community Event Summary

On June 26, 2023, the Tech, Law & Security Program (TLS) co-hosted, along with the Office of Career and Professional Development (OCPD), an event for AUWCL students focused on honors program hiring in the Intelligence Community. Representatives from the CIA, FBI, and NSA participated in a panel moderated by TLS Associate Program Director Laura Draper. Panelists covered a wide range of topics, including the basics of the honors program (both for entry-level attorneys and interns, when applicable); the clearance process and eligibility criteria; and what makes applicants successful.

The Basics

The Honors Programs for entry-level attorneys at both the NSA and CIA are structured around two 1 ½-year assignments, providing an opportunity to get a diversity of experience. The FBI does not have term assignments, but rather assigns honors program hires within the Office of General Counsel based on the needs of the Bureau. For each of the agencies, attorneys hired through these programs are treated like every other attorney in the organization.

The FBI and CIA both hire summer legal interns, which is a great opportunity to learn more about the agency and work on important legal issues. In both instances, the same security clearance that is required for full employment is required for all interns as well.

Clearance Process & Eligibility Criteria*

Each agency requires an in-depth background check and polygraph, a process that typically takes less than 12 months but can take more depending on the applicant's particular background and experience. Panelists agreed that honesty is of the utmost importance in navigating this process, and that upfront disclosure is necessary.

Specific eligibility criteria for the honors program varies, but in each case, applicants must be within three years of graduation from law school. For the FBI, the program is coordinated by the Department of Justice, which requires applicants to either apply before entering their third year of law school or if graduated, to hold only "qualifying employment" (e.g. clerkships or fellowships). The NSA's eligibility criteria are similar. The CIA's is more expansive—applicants are eligible so long as they are less than three years out of law school.

How to Be Successful

Positions in the honors programs are highly competitive, and although each panelist had slight variations on what made candidates successful, there were some common themes. Demonstrated maturity and excellent research and writing skills are essential. Working in the Intelligence Community requires a strong commitment to public service and a heightened sense of integrity, traits that the hiring committees try to discern from candidates' resumes and personal statements.

If you have any additional questions about this event or the programs discussed, please contact TLS at techlawsec@wcl.american.edu with the subject line, "Honors Programs in the Intelligence Community."

* For details on clearance requirements and eligibility criteria, please refer to the agencies' websites.