

Plan Your Own Path

FAMILY LAW



OVERVIEW

Lawyers who practice family law help people deal with important and sometimes difficult issues, including marriage, divorce, annulment, cohabitation, intimate partner violence, custody and visitation, child support, parentage, parental rights, adoption, and more. The practice of family law can involve counseling, drafting, and advance planning (e.g., prenuptial agreements), as well as litigation. Family law is interdisciplinary, as related issues can also arise in business law, criminal law, immigration law, international law, and juvenile justice. Family law practice requires a wide array of practice skills: client counseling, negotiation, drafting, mediation, as well as litigation skills for those disputes that are not informally resolved.

This handout helps you plan your path to a family law career, covering essential competencies for clients and legal employers. As you plan, ensure you incorporate all three sides of this triangle.¹

The left side emphasizes **Client - Centered Relational Skills and Problem-Solving**. This entails responsiveness to clients, a deep understanding of the client's needs, creative problem solving, and client-centered communication.



The right side centers on **Ownership of Professional Development Competencies**. Employers and clients require teamwork, a strong work ethic, an entrepreneurial mindset, determination, attention to detail, integrity, and effective project management skills.

The base comprises fundamental **Technical Competencies**, including knowledge of the law, legal analysis, legal research, communication in the legal context, and legal judgment.

¹ See Neil W. Hamilton, *The Gap Between the Foundational Competencies Clients and Legal Employers Need and the Learning Outcomes Law Schools Are Adopting*, 89 UMKC L. Rev. 559 (2021).

This guide is arranged by the three crucial sides of the triangle.

TRADITIONAL TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES

Enroll in foundational courses during your second year, such as:

- Children and the Law
- Evidence
- Family Law
- Professional Responsibility
- Texas Matrimonial Property

During your 2L and 3L years, build portfolios of knowledge and experiences focusing on the competencies you want to highlight:

Advanced Courses – Electives:

- Advanced Family Law (EW)
- Critical Race Theory (EW)
- Advanced Gender Law: Reproductive Rights (EW)

Related Courses:

- ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution)
- Business Enterprise
- Counseling the Small Business Owner
- Creditors' Rights
- Estate, Gift & Income Tax
- Immigration law
- Income Taxation
- Law Practice Management
- Negotiations
- Trial Advocacy or Trial Techniques I
- Women and the Law
- Health Law
- Principles of Accounting & Finance for Lawyers

With prior permission, law students may request permission to take up to six credit hours of graduate-level courses in other parts of the university. Those interested in family law might find relevant courses offered by the department of Psychology, the Simmons School of Education & Human Development, Cox School of Business, or the Perkins School of Theology.

Upper-Level Writing Requirements: In your third year, choose a family law-related Edited Writing course or Directed Research paper topic (with Faculty pre-approval) to improve and showcase your research, writing, and analytical competencies.

CLIENT-CENTERED RELATIONAL SKILLS AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Thoughtfully evaluate experiential opportunities. These are excellent ways for you to cultivate superior client focus, innovative problem-solving, and effective communication skills.

- **Externships:** These externships are offered through the Government and Public Interest Externship Program (includes classroom component)
 - Attorney General of Texas – Child Support Division
 - CASA – Court Appointed Special Advocates
 - Genesis Women’s Shelter and Support
 - Hope’s Door New Beginning Center
 - Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas
 - Lone Star Legal Aid
 - Mosaic Family Services
 - Texas Lawyers for Children
 - Texas Legal Services Center
 - Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid

- **Clinics:**
 - Child Advocacy Clinic
 - Family Law Clinic
 - Crimes Against Women Clinic

Be sure to work closely with your Office of Career Services advisors to obtain additional experiences (internships, judicial clerkships, public service opportunities) to grow your knowledge and skills in this area.

OWNERSHIP OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMPETENCIES

Experiences beyond the formal curriculum are vital to your professional growth. Aim to acquire experiences that closely replicate as much as possible the work lawyers engage in within the family law space.

- **Student Organizations:** Commit yourself to relevant, on-campus organizations and actively pursue leadership, project management, and teamwork opportunities within the organization.
 - Family Law Association

- **Public Service Opportunities:** These pre-approved placements at 501(c)(3) organizations and government offices may provide you additional perspectives that are valuable to your career development
 - Attorney General of Texas – Child Support Division
 - CASA – Court Appointed Special Advocates
 - Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program
 - Genesis Women’s Shelter and Support
 - Hope’s Door New Beginning Center

- Houston Volunteer Lawyer Program
 - Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas
 - Lone Star Legal Aid
 - Mosaic Family Services
 - Texas Lawyers for Children
 - Texas Legal Services Center
 - Texas RioGrande Legal Aid
- **Board of Advocates:**
 - **Law Journals:**
 - Author a note or comment on a family law topic and seek to have it published in one of our journals or elsewhere
 - **Dallas Bar Association Sections:** Explore your interests and immerse yourself in the legal profession by becoming part of these Dallas Bar Association sections.
 - Family Law

Faculty: Start building a connection with a professor who is familiar with your work and can write you a letter of recommendation or serve as a reference. Here are some of the full-time faculty members who teach in this field.

Natalie Nanasi
Chante Brantley

Joanna Grossman
Diane Sumoski

Josh Tate
Jessica Dixon Weaver

Cultivate Your Personal Network: Reach out to family law attorneys to arrange informational interviews through the Mustang Exchange or connections you establish during your law school journey. You should also ask your Career Services advisor to help you identify graduates and law firms in this space in the location(s) where you want to work.

Full-time and adjunct professor who teach family law courses may have strong networks. Ask them for assistance making these connections.

Attend programs featuring family law attorneys sponsored by the Office of Career Services or student organizations. These kinds of programs are great opportunities to learn more about entry-level careers and to connect with speakers who are often alumni and more willing to assist you.