Earlier this year, sixty members of the Law School’s class of 2005 sent out a total of 2,694 applications for federal clerkships. The competition for those clerkships is intense—a federal judge may receive as many as six hundred applications—so success at obtaining them is one measure of the regard in which a law school and its students are held.

How does the University of Chicago Law School compare? Forty-four members of the class of 2004 won federal clerkships; that is 23 percent of the graduating class. The only other schools with percentages that high are Yale and Harvard.

Moreover, seven of the thirty-five most prestigious clerkships—those at the United States Supreme Court—are currently held by Law School alumni. In relationship to average class size, no other school comes close to rivaling University of Chicago graduates’ representation among current Supreme Court clerks.

Our graduates’ dazzling success at attaining clerkships against such deep competition arises in part from two predictable factors: very intelligent students and the honing of that native ability by a great faculty.

Other reasons for the Law School’s success go deeper. Abbie Willard, Associate Dean for Career Services and Public Initiatives, explains: “The Law School makes a sustained, systemic effort to do everything it can to help a student who is seeking a clerkship. Our commitment to this activity is second to no other school; it’s part of our culture, strongly reinforced by Dean Levmore.” The Office of Career Services staff provides counseling to students regarding all aspects of the application process, from deciding which clerkships to apply for to shining in the selection interview. One counselor devotes nearly all of her time to clerkship issues.

Faculty play a vital role, encouraging students and advising them. At the heart of the process, a faculty clerkship committee uses its considerable experience to help students succeed. This year the committee consists of David Currie, the Edward H. Levi Distinguished Service Professor and Arnold and Frieda Shure Scholar; Dennis Hutchinson, Senior Lecturer in Law and William Rainey Harper Professor in the College; and Abner Mikva, Senior Director of the Mandel Legal Aid Clinic. All three clerked for Supreme Court Justices, and Mikva was Chief Judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit. Dean Levmore says that quality matters as much as quantity in clerkship placements. “Our students are qualified for plenty of excellent clerkships,” he says, “but one critical focus of our efforts here at the Law School is on finding the right clerkship—the one that really matches each student’s interests and career aims. It takes a concerted team effort to achieve that.”

Dan Powell ‘02, who clerked for Appeals Court Judge William Fletcher last year and is currently working for Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, says the Law School’s systems served him very well: “Just about everyone at the Law School was enthusiastic about my decision to pursue a clerkship, and having talked to students from other schools, I can’t imagine a better support network than ours for helping me find the right clerkship for what I was looking for.”

Clerking isn’t for everyone. It offers an opportunity to work on a variety of subjects, but for a single mentor. The pay is less than half of what a first-year law firm associate can earn, hours are generally long, and if the “chemistry” among a judge and his or her clerks should go awry, the experience can be difficult.

Most Law School alumni who have held clerkships, however, dismiss the actual and hypothetical negatives and report that their experiences have been immensely fulfilling in themselves, as well as significantly enhancing the quality of their subsequent work. Dan Powell says, “This has been, and is, an amazing experience. To watch Judge Fletcher and now Justice Stevens as they analyze a legal problem is to learn how a great lawyer must approach his or her work.”

Although clerking once was understood primarily as a vital resume-enhancer for those seeking a prestigious teaching position or aiming for a career in litigation, graduates—and law firms—now fully recognize the broader advantages. Katherine Eldred, ’02, says her experience clerking last year for Judge John Noonan on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals has helped her greatly in her tax practice at Sullivan & Cromwell. “Seeing first-hand all the ins and outs of what goes into making the most compelling appellate argument has added an important dimension to all the work I do,” she says.
Many firms offer bonuses and other incentives to recruit associates with clerking experience. Steven Handler, '71, is a partner at McDermott Will & Emery, which often provides a bonus to help cover expenses during a clerkship, as well as credit toward promotion for time spent clerking. He says the firm's investment is easily justified: "Judicial clerkships give young lawyers an invaluable behind-the-scenes view of the judicial system. In my experience, young lawyers who join the firm after clerking have an understanding of the system that usually requires several years of practice to cultivate. Clerkships also help lawyers hone their writing skills and give lawyers tremendous insight into how judges reach decisions."

Twenty-eight of the 2004 graduates are clerking at Circuit Courts of Appeals, and fifteen are at District Courts. One is at a specialized federal court, the Court of International Trade. The specialized courts can also provide great experience, particularly for students with an interest in a particular area of law. Mark Holmes, '83, now a judge on the U.S. Tax Court, says clerking at the Tax Court can have some underappreciated advantages (plenty of writing and frequent conferences, which are equivalent to en banc consideration), and he urges graduates to include specialized federal courts in their clerkship considerations.

Associate Dean Willard says that students are also pursuing another way to acquire valuable experience—clerking in high-level state courts. 2004 graduate Colin McNary, for example, is now clerking for a justice of the Supreme Court of Alaska, following in the footsteps of Hilary Hardcastle, '03, who clerked at that same court last year. "State Supreme Courts provide fabulous clerking experiences," Willard says. "We'd like to see more students applying for these positions, and we're ready to assist them."

With the extensive, energetic, and individualized assistance that all clerkship applicants receive from the entire Law School staff, faculty, and administration, graduates will continue building strong careers for many years to come.—G.deJ.