

WINTHROP UNIVERSITY

PREPARING FOR LAW SCHOOL: FACTS AND RESOURCES

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LEGAL CAREERS

An undergraduate considering a career in law must realize that the profession is a highly competitive and, in some areas of the country, overcrowded. **Table 1** demonstrates that the number of institutions offering law degrees has increased significantly since the early 1970s. Likewise, over the last two decades, the number of law degrees conferred has increased by almost 21 percent, growing from 36,485 in 1990 to over 44,000 in 2009. As a result, there are nearly **1 million** lawyers in the United States today and the competition for employment is very intense. According to Matthew Shaer of *New York Magazine*, “Nationwide, there are two aspiring lawyers with passing bar-exam scores for every one open job; in New York State, the ratio is even more lopsided, with 9,787 passing the bar in 2009, then competing for roughly 2,100 new positions.”¹ Some recent law graduates have found their employment prospects to be so dour that have taken legal action against their alma maters, arguing that the institutions deliberately manipulated post-graduate employment data to attract more applicants.²

Table 1. Law Degrees Earned, 1970 to 2009

	<u>1970</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2009</u>
Institutions conferring degrees	145	179	182	190	203
Total degrees conferred	14,916	35,647	36,485	38,152	44,045
Percent to women	5.4	30.2	42.2	45.9	45.8

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2012

According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, lawyers held about 759,000 jobs in 2008, with roughly 26 percent being self-employed as partners at law firms or in solo practices.³ Most salaried attorneys held positions in government, in law firms or corporations, or in non-profit organizations. If you scan the Rock Hill or the Charlotte Yellow Pages, then you

will get a sense of how many attorneys are “out there” in our area. Even so, because the law touches nearly every part of our lives—from buying a house to crossing the street—there is always room for a good attorney. “As advocates, [lawyers] represent one of the parties in criminal and civil trials by presenting evidence and arguing in court to support their client. As advisors, lawyers counsel their clients about their legal rights and obligations and suggest particular courses of action in business and personal matters.”⁴ All attorneys, however, research the intent of the law and apply it to the particular circumstances faced by their clients.

Many undergraduates are attracted to the legal profession because of the earning power of those in the field. The salaries of experienced attorneys, though, vary greatly according to type, size, and location of their employers. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Lawyers who own their own practices usually earn less than those who are partners in law firms. Lawyers starting their own practice may need to work part time in other occupations to supplement their income until their practice is well established.”⁵ In mid-year 2008, the median⁶ annual wages of all wage-and-salaried attorneys were \$110,590, with the middle half of the occupation earning between \$74,980 and \$163,320. Below, **Table 2** illustrates how much salaries vary across the industries employing the greatest number of attorneys. Similarly, **Table 3** shows that, in 2007, the median salary for newly minted lawyers was \$68,500, but varied according to the type of work. Starting salaries for attorneys also fluctuate across regions and from one year to the next. Law school graduates with records of superior achievement from outstanding national or regional institutions have the best opportunities in the job market. Nevertheless, “[p]erhaps as a result of competition for attorney positions, lawyers are increasingly finding work in less traditional areas for which legal training is an asset, but not normally a requirement—for example, administrative, managerial, and business positions in banks, insurance firms, real estate companies, government agencies, and other organizations.”⁷

Table 2. Median Salaries, Industries Employing the Largest Number of Lawyers, May 2008

<u>Employer</u>	<u>Salary</u>
Management of companies and enterprises	\$145,770
Federal Executive Branch	126,080
Legal services	116,550
Local government	82,590
State government	78,540

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012

Table 3. Median Salaries, 9 months after Graduation, 2007

<u>Employer</u>	<u>Salary</u>
All graduates	\$68,500
Private practice	108,500
Business	69,100
Government	50,000
Academic/Judicial clerkships	48,000

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012

In summary, any future law student must enter the process with a keen understanding of her or his prospects for both getting into a good law school and finding employment thereafter. This is particularly important given the high cost of attending law school. According to David Segal of *The New York Times*, acquiring a law degree has become more expensive than completing a degree at a four-year university.⁸ From 1988-1989 to 2008-2009, tuition at private law schools increased by nearly 300 percent. Over the same period, tuition at public institutions grew by almost 600 percent. Surprisingly, even while the number of law school applicants has declined over the last two years, for fall 2012, the average tuition will increase by more than double the rate of inflation. Karen Sloan of *The National Law Journal* noted, "Average tuition and fees at **private law schools** will increase **approximately 4 percent** over last year to

\$40,585...That's the first time private-school rates have crossed the \$40,000 threshold. In-state resident students at **public law schools** will see a **6 percent increase** on average, to approximately **\$23,590**. Inflation is running at about 1.7 percent.”⁹ Such tuition rates, even with scholarship money, leave many law school graduates in enormous debt. “Graduates of private schools left with an average \$124,950 in debt last year, while their counterparts at public schools owed an average \$75,728.”

UNDERGRADUATE PREPARATION

Many aspiring law students enter university searching for the major that they believe will best prepare them for law school. Yet, there is no single path to admission. Law is a broad and diverse profession with different specializations calling for widely differing skills. As a result, law schools do not generally recommend any particular major. In fact, one of the greatest features of pre-law education is that there are no specific course requirements that you must take during your college career. **A pre-law student is, quite simply, someone who defines herself or himself as such.** What law schools do seek, however, is a sterling record of achievement, and the two most frequently employed measures of such performance are: 1) a strong grade point average, and 2) a competitive score on the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT). While other factors may be taken into account—including leadership, community service, and exposure to the legal profession—most institutions mainly consider GPA and LSAT scores in making admissions decisions. An estimated **75% to 95% of the admissions decisions are based on these two elements.** Accordingly, there is a bit of common sense advice for the student considering law: choose a major that interests you, take courses that you want to take and do well in them! You should pursue the most challenging discipline in which you have an interest and in which you can maintain a high GPA. Nothing will help you gain admission to law school more than an academic career that demonstrates excellence, diversity, and rigor.

Although no single field of study is preferred, many law school attendees elected to major in subjects like political science, business administration, English, history, and the arts. Since many Winthrop undergraduates are required to declare a minor subject, persons interested in law school might consider pursuing one of the aforementioned disciplines. What is more, interested students should enroll in courses that help them develop the skills needed to succeed and thrive in law school and in the legal profession. You should choose classes that require significant amounts of reading, writing, critical analysis, and in-class discussion. Frequently recommended subjects include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Legal studies
- English Literature
- Modern English and Grammar
- Creative Writing
- American Government
- United States History
- World Civilizations
- Economics
- Mathematics
- Logic and Language
- Constitutional Law
- The Judiciary
- Public Speaking
- Foreign language

Your central task as a student is to acquire the reading, writing, and analytical skills needed in the legal profession. One essential point bears repeating: **A strong record in a major that you love will serve you better than a mediocre profile in a discipline that someone told you was best for preparing for law school.**

There is one other important consideration when deciding on an undergraduate major: What will you do with your major if you change your mind about pursuing a law degree? What will you do if you do not get into law school? (Recent data suggests that **a GPA of 3.0** and an **LSAT score of 145-150** have become the minimum requirements for admission to **any** law school.¹⁰) You want to choose a field of study that has a built-in “Plan B,” an alternative plan that that leaves you with sound, attractive options if your law school plans are not realized. This is another strong reason for choosing a major that you like. These are the key points to consider during your academic planning.

With this in mind, you should focus on a specific group of “**core skill and value areas**” to guide you in your course selection while at Winthrop. (These skill and value areas are drawn, in large part, from the Statement of Skills and Values contained in the 1992 Report of the American Bar Association Task Force on Law Schools and the Profession, *Legal Education and Professional Development: An Educational Continuum*.¹¹) A description of these core skills and values are as follows:

1. Analytic/Problem Solving Skills

Students should seek courses and other experiences that will engage them in critical thinking about important issues and will give them experience in structuring and evaluating arguments for and against propositions that are susceptible to reasoned debate. Good legal education teaches students to “think like a lawyer,” but the analytic and problem-solving skills required of attorneys are not fundamentally different from those employed by other professionals. The law school experience will develop and refine those crucial skills, but one must enter law school with a reasonably well developed set of analytic and problem-solving capabilities.

2. Critical Reading Abilities

Preparation for legal education should include substantial experience at close reading and critical analysis of complex textual material, for much of what law students and attorneys do involves careful reading and sophisticated comprehension of judicial opinions, statutes, documents, and other written materials. It is important to note that law school should not be the first time that a student has been rigorously engaged in the enterprise of carefully reading and understanding, and critically analyzing, complex written material of substantial length. Potential law students should also be aware that the study and practice of law require the ability to read and assimilate large amounts of material, oftentimes in a short period.

3. Writing Skills

Those seeking to prepare for legal education should develop a high degree of skill at written communication. Language is the most important tool of the lawyer, and lawyers must learn to express themselves clearly and concisely. Fundamental writing skills should be developed and refined before one enters law school. Those preparing for legal education should seek as many experiences as possible that will require rigorous analytical writing, including preparing original pieces of substantial length and revising written work in a response to constructive criticism.

4. Oral Communication and Listening Abilities

The ability to speak clearly and decisively is another skill that is essential to success in law school and the practice of law. Lawyers must also have excellent listening skills if they are to understand their clients and others with whom they must interact daily.

Before attending law school individuals should seek to develop their basic speaking and listening skills, such as by engaging in debate, making formal presentations in class, or speaking before groups in school, the community, or the workplace.

5. **General Research Skills**

Although there are many research sources and techniques that are specific to the law, an individual need not have developed any familiarity with these specific skills or materials before entering law school. However, the individual who comes to law school without ever having undertaken a project that requires significant library research and the analysis of large amounts of information obtained from that research will be at a severe disadvantage. Those wishing to prepare for legal education should select courses and seek experiences that will require them to plan a research strategy, to undertake significant library research, and to analyze, organize, and present a reasonably large amount of material.

6. **Organization and Management Skills**

To study and practice law, you are going to need to be able to organize large amounts of information, identify objectives, and create a structure for applying that information in an efficient way in order to achieve desired results. Many law school courses, for example, are graded primarily on the basis of one examination at the end of the course, and many projects in the practice of law require the compilation of large amounts of information from a wide variety of sources. You are going to need to be able to prepare and assimilate large amounts of information in an effective and efficient manner. Some of the requisite experience can be obtained through undertaking school projects that require substantial research and writing, or through the preparation of major reports for an employer, a school, or a civic organization.

7. **Values of Serving Others and Promoting Justice**

Each member of the legal profession should be dedicated both to the objectives of serving others honestly, competently, and responsibly, and to the goals of improving fairness and the quality of justice in the legal system. If you are thinking of entering the legal profession, you should seek some significant experience, before coming to law school, in which you may devote substantial effort toward assisting others. Participation in public service projects or similar efforts at achieving objectives established for common purposes can be particularly helpful.

THE LAW SCHOOL ADMISSIONS TEST (LSAT)

The [Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools](#) and the [Law Services Information Handbook](#) have the answers to most of the questions that you might have about both the procedures for applying to law schools and taking the LSAT. A few observations, however, can be made about the LSAT. First, **the LSAT is like no examination given in college.** It is a sophisticated test

of thinking skills based on reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, and logical problem solving. The LSAT also includes an updated writing sample section. Do not be lulled into complacency about the importance of this test. Although it may not seem logical or “fair” to give greater consideration to an applicant’s performance on a four-hour test than to her or his four year undergraduate career, some law school admissions committees do weigh an applicant’s LSAT scores more heavily than her or his GPA.

Second, **preparing for the LSAT is now standard.** If you fail to prepare for the examination, then you are putting yourself at a serious disadvantage. You are putting yourself in a select group of undergraduates—people who have done well enough in college to think that they have a chance at law school. However, you will now be competing against some of *the best* University students for admission into law school. You must take LSAT preparation seriously. If you have a strong GPA, then a high LSAT score can all but guarantee admission to law school. If, however, your grades are mediocre, then you **must** do extremely well on the LSAT to have a chance at admission. The commercial products (the pre-tests and practice materials that can be purchased at area bookstores) provide a structured way to prepare for the exam. Sometimes, institutions such as UNC-Charlotte, Queens College, or York Technical College offer less expensive exam preparation programs. You might even consider test preparation services offered by companies such as [Kaplan](#). Nevertheless, whether you get ready through a formal program or with your own materials, you should take at least one full-length practice test near the end of your preparation. The importance of the exam cannot be overstated. Plan accordingly.

Third, **which LSAT test date to choose depends on which schools that you are considering.** Some regional and national institutions prefer an early application pool, so the June test at the end of junior year or the early fall tests of the senior year are best. For those students considering the University of South Carolina as a first choice, the October or December test date (at the end of fall semester of senior year) may be best.

Finally, **do not take the actual LSAT for practice. Your score will count.** Under current Law Services rules, all of your LSAT scores are forwarded to the schools that you list, unless you expressly request your test not to be scored or sent to any schools (cf. [Law Services Information Book](#)). The law school admissions committees, therefore, will have a report of **all** your LSAT results. This either could positively or negatively influence your prospects for admission. If you make a significantly better score on a re-test, then an admissions committee may look upon it favorably. Conversely, a drop in the test score may negate the first attempt.

APPLICATION STRATEGIES AND THE LAW SCHOOL LOCATOR

There are several classifications of law schools. Those with **national reputations** are the most prominent and are highly competitive. These include Harvard, Yale, Chicago, Stanford, Columbia, Michigan, Virginia, and Berkeley. Some **regional** law schools have very good reputations and are regarded second only to the national schools. In the southern United States, these include Duke, Emory, Georgia, North Carolina, Wake Forest, South Carolina, Mercer, Texas, Tulane, and Vanderbilt. **State** law schools may or may not have regional reputations. All [AALS](#) accredited law schools have basic descriptions in the [Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools](#). A hard copy of the guide is available for review in the Pre-law Advisory office in 332 Bancroft.

One helpful tool for developing a strategy to get into law school is the [Law School Locator](#), which can be accessed through the [Law School Admission Council](#) website. The Locator can be used as a guide to **estimate** chances of acceptance at various schools based on the median GPA and LSAT scores of accepted students at those schools in recent years.

CONCLUSION: HAVE A PLAN B

No school can assure success for its graduates, especially regarding the highly competitive field of law school admissions. Suppose you have been scared off or have been denied admission to law school, but still want to pursue a degree in law? Many institutions, including some in the southeast, offer advanced degrees (usually an M.A.) in **Criminal Justice**. Yet another possibility is **paralegal training**, in which students train intensively to become lawyers' assistants. The National Center for Paralegal Training is located in Atlanta. Another option is a **Judicial Administration** program, which combines work in law with an advanced degree in public administration.

In summary, this handout is meant to acquaint you with some of the key points to consider in preparing for law school. Other questions can be directed to the Winthrop pre-law advisor, Dr. Adolphus G. Belk, Jr. His office is located in 332 Bancroft Hall and the phone number is (803) 323-4581. The main phone number of the Department of Political Science is (803) 323-2009. The pre-law advisor holds resources for students considering law school as well as catalogs from most of the country's law schools.

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Endnotes

¹ Matthew Shaer, “The Case(s) Against Law School”, *New York Magazine*, March 4, 2012, <http://nymag.com/news/features/law-schools-2012-3> (March 4, 2012).

² Mary Beth Marklein, “Grads takings law schools to task for poor job market”, *USA Today*, August 24, 2008. http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2010-08-24-1Alawschool24_ST_N.htm (March 12, 2012); Shaer, “The Case(s) Against Law School.”

³ “Occupational Outlook Handbook: Lawyers,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d. <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos053.htm> (March 15, 2012), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ The median is the middle value that splits a distribution into two halves. Thomas H. Wonnacott and Ronald J. Wonnacott, *Introductory Statistics*, 5th ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ David Segal, “Law School Economics: Ka-Ching!,” *The New York Times*, July 16, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/business/law-school-economics-job-market-weakens-tuition-rises.html> (August 19, 2012).

⁹ Karen Sloan, “Tuition is still growing,” *The National Law Journal*, August 20, 2012. http://www.law.com/jsp/nlj/PubArticleNLJ.jsp?id=1202567898209&Tuition_is_still_growing&slret urn=20120719122838 (August 19, 2012). Emphasis added.

¹⁰ Kim Dustman and Phil Handwerk, “National Applicant Trends—2010,” *The Law School Admission Council*, August 2011. <http://www.lsac.org/default.asp> (March 21, 2012).

¹¹ “Statement on Prelaw Preparation,” *The Law School Admission Council*, n.d. <http://www.lsac.org/jd/Think/prelaw-preparation.asp> (March 12, 2012).