

PREPARING FOR LAW SCHOOL: FACTS AND RESOURCES

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Understanding the Pitfalls and Promise of the Legal Profession

Many Americans have long viewed a law degree as a ticket to a worthwhile and lucrative career. Yet, undergraduates contemplating a legal career must recognize the pitfalls and promise of the profession. First, it is an extremely competitive field and, in some areas of the country, overcrowded. Today, there are [just over 200 accredited law schools](#) in the United States and Table 1 shows just how much that number has increased over time. Amazingly, the total number of law degrees conferred swelled by almost 22 percent from 1990 to 2010, growing from 36,485 to 44,346 graduates. One can also see an exponential increase in the number and percentage of women completing law school. Although the number of graduates has declined over the last few years, the competition for employment remains strong because, even with projected growth in new jobs for lawyers, there are more attorneys seeking work than there are jobs available. For instance, Shaer (2012) wrote, “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.”

Table 1. Law Degrees Earned, 1970 to 2015

	<u>1970</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2015</u>
Institutions conferring degrees	145	179	182	190	205	212
Total degrees conferred	14,916	35,647	36,485	38,152	44,436	40,024
Number and percent conferred to women	801 5.37%	10,754 30.17%	15,406 42.23%	17,514 45.91%	20,962 47.27%	19,214 48.01%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017

Second, a legal education is expensive. From 1988-1989 to 2008-2009, tuition at private law schools increased by nearly 300 percent (Segal 2011). Over the same period, tuition at public institutions grew by almost 600 percent. More recently, according to *U.S. News & World Report*,

The average annual tuition and fees at private law schools in the 2018-2019 academic year—\$49,095—was around \$8,400 higher than the average annual out-of-state tuition and fees at public law schools. The difference between average annual tuition and fees at private schools and average annual in-state tuition and fees at public schools was enormous: around \$21,500 (Kowarski 2019a).

Even for those with scholarships, such tuition rates leave many law school graduates in enormous debt. Some degree earners—saddled with student loans and facing dour employment prospects—have taken legal action against their alma maters, arguing that the institutions deliberately manipulated post-graduate employment data to attract more applicants (Marklein 2008; Shaer 2012). What is more, in 2018, Gallup found that law graduates were less likely than other advanced degree holders to say their degree prepared them well for life after graduate school. In fact, less than a quarter of law graduates strongly agreed that their education was worth the cost, compared with about six in 10 of those with medical (58 percent) or doctoral (64 percent) degrees (Auter 2018).

Yet, despite the sobering news about law school and the legal profession, some analysts say, “ignore the haters” because the payoff is worth it. They contend that for most law graduates the net present value of the degree “typically exceeds its cost by hundreds of thousands of dollars” (Matthews 2013). Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reveal that, in 2016, lawyers held about 792,500 jobs with roughly 20 percent being self-employed as partners at law firms or in solo practices (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS] 2019). Most salaried attorneys held positions in government, in law firms or corporations, or in nonprofit 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 aspect of our lives—from buying a home to crossing the street—there is always room for a good attorney. “As advocates, they represent one of the parties in a criminal or civil trial by presenting evidence and arguing in support of their client. As advisors, lawyers counsel their clients about their legal rights and obligations and suggest courses of action in business and personal matters” (BLS 2019). All attorneys, however, research the intent of the law and apply it to the particular circumstances faced by their clients.

Many students are attracted to the legal profession because of the earning power of those in the field. The salaries of experienced attorneys, though, vary greatly depending to sector (public or private), type, size, and location of their employers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics notes, “Lawyers who own their own practices usually earn less than those who work in law firms or other business establishments” (BLS 2019). It is also worth noting that attorneys who build their own practices sometimes work part-time in other occupations to supplement their income until their practice is firmly established. In mid-year 2018, the median annual wages of all wage-and-salaried attorneys were \$129,910, with the lowest 10 percent earning under \$58,220 and the highest 10 percent making in excess of \$208,000. Below, Table 2 illustrates how much salaries vary across the industries employing the greatest number of attorneys. Similarly, though dated, 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” (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS] 2009).

In sum, 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—which now exceeds completing an undergraduate degree (Segal 2011). If you want to be a high-powered corporate lawyer, then know that those jobs are extraordinarily difficult to get. “On the flip side, aspiring government lawyers and those working for nonprofit organizations should be mindful that starting salaries for positions in the public sector, such as policy jobs at advocacy organizations, are typically much lower than what's offered in the private sector” (Kowarski 2019a).

Table 2. Median Annual Wages, Top Industries Employing the Largest Number of Lawyers, May 2018

<u>Employer</u>	<u>Salary</u>
Federal government	\$145,160
Legal services	122,150
Local government (excluding education and hospitals)	94,490
State government (excluding education and hospitals)	86,900

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018

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

Undergraduate Preparation: How to Become a Strong Candidate for Law School

Aspiring law students usually enter college searching for the perfect 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—nor does the [American Bar Association](#). 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 academic achievement, and the two most frequently employed measures of such performance are: 1) a high grade point average, and 2) a competitive score on the Law School Admission 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. In effect, these two variables could account for greater than 50 percent of the decision to admit. 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 select 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. After all, experts caution against picking a major simply because it seems easy, as law school admissions officers consider the difficulty of your coursework when evaluating student performance (Kowarski 2017).

While no single field of study is preferred, many successful law school applicants pursued subjects such as political science, psychology, English, history, economics, philosophy, sociology, the arts and humanities, and business administration. Since many Winthrop undergraduates are required to declare a minor subject, those interested in law school might consider pursuing one of the aforementioned disciplines. Moreover, interested students should

enroll in particular courses that help them develop the skills needed to succeed in law school and beyond. You should choose classes that require significant amounts of reading, writing, critical analysis, and in-class discussion and debate. Frequently recommended subjects include, but are not limited to, the following:

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

Remember, your main task as a student is to acquire the reading, writing, and analytical thinking skills needed in the legal profession. Students who excel in these areas have the potential to become successful attorneys (Kowarski 2019b). Lastly, 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. Take heed.

There is one other important consideration when deciding on an undergraduate degree program: 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? Data from the Law School Admission Council ([LSAC](#)) show that, during the 2017-2018 year, the typical applicant had an undergraduate GPA of 3.31 and an LSAT score of 153.6. The numbers for college senior applicants were 3.45 and 154.3, respectively. Again, the competition is fierce. Therefore, you want to select a field of study that has a built-in “Plan B,” an alternative plan that leaves you with attractive options if your law school aspirations are not realized. This is another strong reason for picking 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 your course selection while at Winthrop. (These 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*.) [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.

Understanding the Law School Admission Test (LSAT)

The Law School Admission Council (LSAC) and its [Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools](#) have the answers to many of the questions you might have about both taking the LSAT and the procedures for applying to law schools. A few observations, however, can be made about the LSAT. First, it is like no examination given in college. Rather, it is a sophisticated test of thinking skills based on reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, and logical problem solving. The

test “is comprised of five multiple-choice sections, each 35 minutes long” (Moody 2019). It also includes a writing section that is 35 minutes long. 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 exam 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. The LSAT is scored on a scale from 120 to 180, with the average test taker scoring at about 151. According to one high profile test preparation service, a grade between 152 and 158 (top 50 percent) might be considered “good enough” for admission, while a mark between 159 and 163 (top 25 percent) would designate one as a more “competitive” applicant (Kaplan 2019). If you want to apply to the highest ranked programs, then you might need to land in the top 10 percent of all test takers by scoring between 164 and 180 (Moody 2019).

Second, preparing for the LSAT is now standard. If you fail to effectively prepare for the exam, then you are putting yourself at a serious disadvantage. You are placing 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. You will now, however, be competing against some of the nation’s best university students for admission into law school. Ergo, you must take LSAT preparation seriously. If you have a strong GPA, then a high LSAT score can all but guarantee admission to a good program. If, however, your grades are mediocre, then you must do extremely well on the LSAT to have a chance at admission. The commercial products (i.e., the pre-tests and practice materials that can be purchased at area bookstores) provide a structured way to prepare for the test. 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](#), [the Princeton Review](#), or [National Test Preparation Service](#), a vendor based out of Charlotte. 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.

Next, which LSAT test date to choose depends on which schools 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 admissions committees, therefore, will have a report of all your 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 or tiers of law schools. Those with outstanding national reputations are the most prominent and are highly selective. These include Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Stanford, Chicago, NYU, UPENN, Northwestern, Duke, Michigan, Virginia, the University of California, Berkeley, and Washington University in St. Louis. Some regional law schools have great reputations and are regarded second only to the national schools. In the southern states, these include the University of Texas at Austin, Vanderbilt, Emory, Georgia, Florida, UNC Chapel Hill, Wake Forest, Tulane, and South Carolina. State law schools may or may not have strong regional reputations.

All institutions accredited by the Association of American Law Schools ([AALS](#)) 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. Interested students should use the [Law School Locator](#), which can be accessed through the LSAC website, as a tool to estimate the chances of acceptance at various programs based on the median GPA and LSAT scores of accepted students at those institutions in recent years.

Lastly, although your LSAT score and GPA will likely carry the greatest weight with admissions committees, your personal statement and letters of recommendation provide additional opportunities to show that you have either acquired or sharpened the skills they look for in would be law students. With regard to the personal statement, you must offer the reader a comprehensive story that makes a sophisticated, convincing argument about why you want to attend law school. A focused statement could highlight experiences that molded your character, or discuss your career goals. Industry insiders suggest that “applicants who can communicate their interest in law in an engaging way, without using clichés, can impress admissions officers” (Kowarski 2018). Your personal statement takes on even greater significance if you struggled with the LSAT, but are still determined to go to law school (Kowarski 2016). Finally, you need to get excellent letters of recommendation from professors who have seen you perform at your best. The letter writer should be able to offer a powerful testimony that champions your case, as opposed to passing along a “lukewarm endorsement” (Kowarski 2018). Do your part to help the recommenders write such letters by providing them with copies of your personal statement, unofficial transcript, résumé, or any other items they might need.

Conclusion: Have a Plan B

No school can assure success for its graduates, especially regarding the highly competitive field of law school admissions. What if you have been deterred 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. 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 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) 323-2209. The pre-law advisor holds resources for students considering law school as well as catalogs from some of the nation's law schools—most of which are also available online.

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