Planning for Law School

A Basic Guide

Career Services

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Here to help you get ahead.

Approximately 5 % of graduating Southwestern University students enter law school directly upon graduation. About 25-30 % of SU graduates each year enter some kind of continuing education program. SU students definitely have the potential to secure entry to and graduate from graduate and professional school – and planning ahead helps!

The most successful students take every advantage to enhance their profiles. Your first source of information should be the American Bar Association (ABA)'s article on Preparation for Legal Education. This statement lists the skills and knowledge that are essential to law. The statement is available at http://www.abanet.org/legaled/prelaw/prep.html.

Use your undergraduate years to determine if becoming a lawyer is the right career choice for you. The faculty who serve as pre-law advisors (Dr. Tim O'Neill, 512.863.1976, and Dr. Kerry Bruns) and Career Services will serve as your allies every step of the way, from helping you determine the resources that will assist your decision through the actual application process.

Choosing a Major

The wonderful but frustrating truth is that law schools have no preference for any major or course work, but they do consider very strongly how well you do in your choice of major. All undergraduate majors have characteristics that will help you in law school: engineering and science students develop analytical reasoning; liberal arts students develop knowledge about the structure of society and reading- and writing-intensive skills, while business majors obtain corporate and entrepreneurial insights. Students from all majors at Southwestern University have become successful lawyers.

Don't rush your decision about your major: instead, take time to investigate your interests and be open-minded. We advise students to major in what they enjoy most and what they would consider for an alternate career. Usually, you do better in courses in which you like the material. You may also decide not to go to law school immediately after graduation or you may change your mind about it completely. Use your electives to dabble in course work required for other majors. This will broaden your educational background as well as allow you to check out other possibilities for careers.

Making the Grade

The two most important determinants of admission to law school are your cumulative grade point average and your LSAT score. However, filling your undergraduate semesters with blow-off courses will backfire on you in several ways. First, your LSAT score will reflect your lack of cognitive growth and flabby thinking skills. Second, law school requires overwhelming amounts of reading and analysis, and talented, determined and extremely competitive classmates will surround you. A non-challenging educational program will cripple you from the start. Third, in college you should seek out the excellent professors, not just the courses. Honors courses, for instance, often offer the best professors, smaller class sizes, and lots of chance for debate. (They also allow you to make great professor contacts for law school evaluation letters). Most importantly, your undergraduate years help mold the type of person you become. At no other time in your life you will be able to sample such a myriad of offerings at your discretion. Indulge yourself!

When you apply to law school, every grade from every college will be compiled into one grade point average. This means that although the grades earned at a community college do not "count" at Southwestern, they will count when you apply to law school! Additionally, courses via correspondence or the Internet will count as well.

There are no required courses for law school. Many prior applicants recommend Introduction to Logic because the LSAT is largely a logical reasoning test. Many students take courses in history, accounting, economics, anthropology, political science, literature, philosophy, sociology, speech, and psychology to round out their curriculum. Career Services and faculty advisors are available to assist students in determining which courses may be beneficial to them.

The LSAT

Your Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score is the second major determinant of whether you get accepted into law school and which schools will admit you. This multiple-choice exam contains five 35-minute sections, out of which four count towards your score. One section is experimental, but you will not know which one it is. These sections test reading comprehension and analytical and logical reasoning skills. In addition, there is a 35-minute writing sample section. The test is scored on a scale of 120-180. ***Never take the LSAT for practice!*** Some schools average your scores if you take the LSAT more than once; many do not favor multiple scores at all, especially if the second score is lower.

Students should plan to take the LSAT no later than June after their junior year. This will allow you to receive and assess your scores before sending off your applications. Waiting to take the October test in your senior year gives you less time to plan and implement your application strategy.

Extracurricular Activities

In addition to grades and test scores, law schools examine your resume to see what types of activities you have participated in and what leadership opportunities you have taken. All pre-law students should consider joining the SU Pre-Law Society, a law-related student organization. This group provides speakers such as lawyers and admissions officers, field trips to law schools, mock LSATs, and plenty of camaraderie with students with similar aspirations. In addition to student organizations on campus, you should consider community service opportunities, internships, study abroad, and work experience. There are no "required" activities for law school, but the most competitive applicants tend to have demonstrated leadership experience and have often take study abroad trips or completed internships. Career Services or the faculty member doing pre-law advising can help you determine which activities and programs will best suit your needs and goals.

Law School Applications

In general, you will begin working on parts of the application at the end of your junior year. Since many schools use a rolling-admissions (first-come, first-served) policy, send your applications off by the end of October of your senior year. All paperwork should be complete by December. This includes transcripts, recommendation letters, and Credential Assembly Services (CAS) Reports. There are generally no interviews. See Career Services' "Applying to Law School" handout for more details.

Make Your Plans

- Investigate law as a career by reading (see list below), interviewing lawyers and judges and being an active member of a law-related student organization. Obtain realistic information about post-law school employment rates and starting salaries. Begin networking in the legal community now so that you can properly focus your energy and time during law school.

- Explore other career options with your academic advisor or Career Services. Make use of your campus resources!

- Correct your academic weaknesses *now*. Developing reading speed, study skills, and test-taking strategies are just some of the topics about which you can get help at The Center for Academic Success.

- Develop your relationships with your professors early for recommendation letter purposes and mentoring later. You do not have to have a problem to see a professor during office hours! Professors are interesting and have a wealth of knowledge. You can't afford to be shy in the career you have chosen.

- Law-related internships or employment will enhance your ability to make an informed decision to attend law school and get marketable practical experience. You can volunteer, be a part-time student worker or work full-time in the summer. Career Services has helpful information regarding legal careers.

- Give your academic performance top priority -- don't let a poor record make your career decision for you.

Other Pre-Law Resources

American Bar Association
http://www.abanet.org/legaled/prelaw/prep.html

Law School Admission Council www.lsac.org

National Association of Law Placement www.nalp.org

SU Career Services Website
www.southwestern.edu/offices/careers/graduateschool/lawschool.php

SU Pre-Law Society

SU Washington Semester Program

Reading List

The Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools. LSAC and LSAS publication.

ABA Guide to Approved Law Schools. American Bar Association.

Pre-Law Companion. Ronald Coleman.

The Official Lawyer's Handbook. D. Robert White.

One L: An Inside Account of Life in the First Year at Harvard Law School. Scott Turow.

An Introduction to Legal Reasoning. Edward H. Levi.

The Spirit of the Common Law. Roscoe Pound.

The Bramble Bush. Karl N. Llewellyn.

Going to Law School? Readings on a Legal Career. Ehrlich and Hazzard.

John Marshall, A Life in Law. Leonard Baker.

The Washington Lawyer. Charles Horsky.

The Growth of American Law. J.W. Hurst.

Thinking About Law School: A Minority Guide. LSAC and LSAS Publication.

Cracking the System: The LSAT. The Princeton Review.

Full Disclosure: Do You Really Want to Be a Lawyer? Complied by Susan Bell.

The Lure of the Law. Richard W. Moll.